

異世界料理道

Cooking with
wild game.

Author. **EDA** Illust. こちも

VOLUME
1



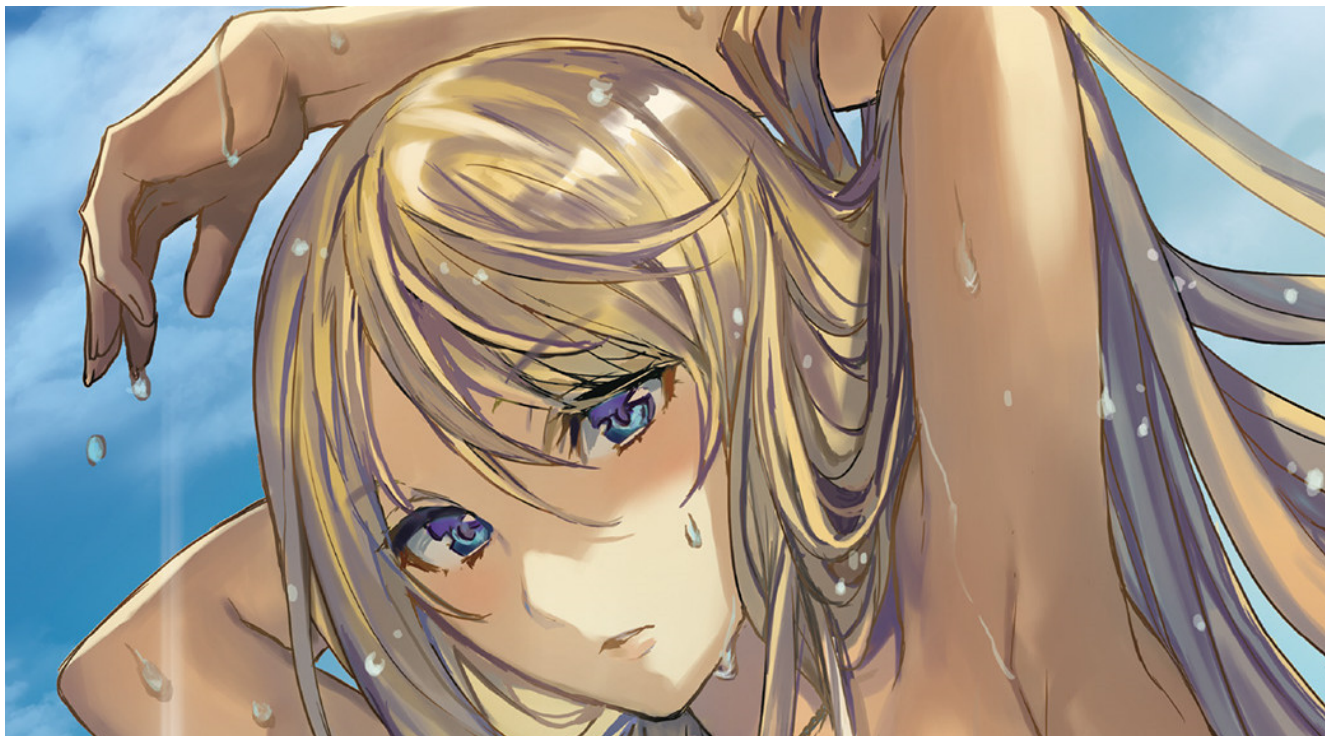
Cooking with Wild Game 異世界料理道

Volume 1

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Credits



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「さて。お前はいつたい何者なのだ？」
ぬらりと光る蛮刀が、俺の鼻先に突きつけられる。

異世界料理道

Cooking with wild game.

VOLUME
1



レイナ＝ルウ

ルウ家の次姉。『かまど番』に誇りを持っていて、料理の上手いアスタを尊敬している。

つるみあすた／アスタ

異世界に迷い込んだ見習い料理人。
森辺の食事を向上させるため、
試行錯誤することに。

ドンダ＝ルウ

森辺の中で大きな力を持つ、
ルウ家の家長。本人も狩人
として有数の力を持っている。

ヴィナ＝ルウ

ルウ家の長姉。閉鎖的な
森辺から、外へ出たいと
願っている。

アイ＝ファ

アスタを森で拾った、ファ家の
家長。女性ながら、家を守る
ために狩りをしている。



「……美味しい、というのは、こういうことなのだな」
アイーファは、ほんのちよつとだけ……その可憐な口もとをほころばせた。



Prologue

When I came to, I found myself inside an unfamiliar forest.

I was lying with my limbs spread out amidst these unknown trees.

「Strange...?」

I propped myself up and surveyed the surrounding with giddy eyes.

This was a forest.

I was inside an unfamiliar forest.

No, I grew up in a prosperous city, so I didn't have a 「forest I was familiar with」 anyway. But this place felt like the Amazon rainforest, and didn't feel like Japan at all.

The trees had weird twists and turns.

Giant fern-like vegetation.

Exotic flowers that looked poisonous.

Bird calls I had never heard before.

Layers of leaf canopies blocked out the sky. I couldn't even tell what colour the heavens was.

Where the hell am I?

Most of my body was hidden beneath the thick undergrowth. I started inspecting myself.

I was dressed in white, with white chef uniform, apron and shoes.

There was a black logo on my chest, and it reads 『Shop Tsurumi』.

My hair was wrapped in a bandana, this was my usual attire.

Why was I lying here dressed like this?

I crossed my legs and sat down, trying to recall what happened before I lost consciousness.

And—— While I was shifting my body, my hand touched something.

It was hard and smooth, and felt like polished wood.

I pulled that thing out of the grass—— It was a Santoku¹ knife in a pure white sheath.

Its black handle fitted my palm well. The blade was 21 cm long.

1 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santoku>

I recognized the knife without needing to draw it out of its white wooden sheath. This Santoku knife was a prized product from the old knife shop in Kyoto 『Shop Sakaki』. My dad treasured this knife more than his own life.

The moment I laid eyes on this knife, I remember the entire incident.

I'm Tsurumi Asuta.

My family name's kanji Tsu of Tsugaru, stay and see. My given name could be read as 「becoming fat tomorrow.」

Seventeen years old and in my second year of a public high school. 170cm tall, 58kg and not exceptionally fat. I was born in Kanto Chiba, not in Tsugaru city.

My family runs a diner called 『Shop Tsurumi』. Our business wasn't bad, or rather, it always had been good until those guys showed up last month.

The building besides us was set to be renovated into a composite entertainment complex, and the new owners requested us to sell the diner to him.

On the surface, his reason was: 「I want to build a carpark here」.

But his real thoughts were: 「I plan to build a food court inside the entertainment complex, and the popular diner right besides me would probably be bad for business.」.

We had no reason to accept his one-sided request, and rejected him firmly. But the other party wasn't that simple, and appeared to have connections to the underworld. Rumors said that he seized control of his building from the original owners through nefarious means.

And so, when the building renovation started, they started harassing us.

The steel shutter of the shop was vandalized with the words 「Horribly Polluted」, constant phone calls with no sound, carcass of cats being dumped at the shop entrance... classic coercion methods.

Only one of their harassment methods kept up with modern times. They left comments on review websites, spreading rumors that 「customers visiting this diner often suffer from food poisoning」.

And of course, our usual patrons wasn't fazed by such rumors and dined here as usual. But new customers and the number of university students visiting after class fell, and this reflected on our account book.

Surprised by how much influence such website had made me depressed.

Even so, my dad still said with a smile:

「People actually believe such garbage. It is their loss to miss out on my dish.」

What happened sometime later finally took his smile away.

It should have been just a few hours ago.

Dad instructed me to prepare the ingredients for the evening crowd and went out to stock up on supplies. He had an accident with a pick-up truck and was rushed to the hospital.

After receiving an emergency call from the hospital, I rushed there in my chef attire.

My dad was still smiling on his hospital bed.

Although he was smiling, his legs suffered complex fractures.

His arm and head was wrapped in bandages which were stained with blood in a few spots. A van traveling at 80km/h collided with my dad. Even the doctor was surprised and said: 「It's a miracle he survived.」

It was a hit and run. Many witnesses said the car plate had been removed, and the driver wore a knit cap and shades, concealing his face.

It was a carefully planned perfect crime.

Even so, my dad was still smiling. If they really want to kill him, they probably need a dump truck.

「So, when I can be discharged?」

When the heavily injured patient asked with a smile, the young doctor looked troubled.

「No, well, instead of being discharged, you need to undergo a brain scan and operations on your legs...」

「Alright. But when can I be discharged?」

「I can't really tell at this point... Both of your legs have complex fractures, who knows how long rehabilitation alone would take...」

「I see. I will leave this to you then, but I need to attend to my shop. I don't mind using a wheelchair, but please discharge me as soon as possible. If I leave my shop to this dumb ass, it will close down.」

The dumb ass my dad mentioned was me of course.

My dad was a man who would work to his death with his knife even if he needed a wheelchair or crutches.

Even I felt like laughing when I thought about that.

At this moment—— I received a call from my childhood friend Reina.

She told me 「『Shop Tsurumi』 is on fire!」

When I told dad about that, the smile was gone from his face for the first time.

「Asuta! The knife! At least save that knife from the fire!」

I charged out of the room, and returned with a faster speed than my journey to the hospital.

Dad valued that Santoku knife from 『Shop Sakaki』 more than his own life. *A real chef will be able to satisfy his customers no matter what ingredients or tools he has!* Although dad always says that, he will always say this about the knife purchased at the traditional knife shop 『Shop Sakaki』 in Kyoto and passed down from the previous generation: 『But, I can't do it without this guy』 .

Only that knife—— keep it safe.

Despite the harassment, truck hit and run, fracture in both legs and the terrible business, my dad's heart didn't waver—— But if he lose the Santoku knife from 『Shop Sakaki』 , his heart would shatter.

That's why I ran with all my might.

But when I reached the shop, it was already surrounded by dozens of people, and the fire brigade was already here to put out the fire.

However, 『Shop Tsurumi』 was still surrounded by flames, and the smoke rose into the autumn sky of June.

No matter how much more water was sprayed, the shop would definitely be burned completely.

That was how intense the fire was.

Just like a nightmare.

「Asuta-chan...」

Reina stood with a blank stare. When she saw me, she leaned on to me with a crying face.

I grabbed her slender shoulders and nodded—— then charged into the sea of flames.

Chapter 1 - The Absolutely Horrendous Dinner

Part 1

And now, I was here.

I shook off Reina and the firefighters and charged into the flames, and now, I found myself in this unfamiliar forest alone. When I made it through the sea of flames back then, I reached the kitchen in a perilous situation and picked up the Santoku knife.

The next instant, the building made an intense sound and started to collapse—— I should have been buried together with the Santoku knife and cooked under the fire and smog.

But there wasn't any burns on me, or even any scorch marks at all.

And I had the knife that should have burned to crisp with me in my hand.

「This... must be the world after death.」

I tried pinching my cheeks, and it still hurt as expected.

That was only natural, and even if this was the world after death, it didn't feel like a dream or delusion.

A warm breeze came from the grass.

It was hot and humid.

I felt sweat drip down my cheeks.

The smooth sensation of the wooden sheath.

..... This was definitely not a dream or delusion.

「I'm really dead!」

I shouted and sprawled down onto the ground again.

It couldn't be help that I died. It was impossible to survive after charging into such an intense sea of flame.

However—— I couldn't just watch idly by back then.

I only did something so foolish because I didn't want to see my dad's look of despair.

In the end, I couldn't protect the Santoku knife and even lost my life. That wouldn't do.

A decade ago, his wife fell to illness. Now, he lost his shop and his son. If he also loses the Santoku knife from 『Shop Sakaki』 — what then would dad live for?

With the sheathed Santoku knife in my hands, I closed my eyes tightly and gritted my teeth.

If I didn't do that, I think I would burst into unsightly tears.

Reina is probably crying right now...

I couldn't see my childhood friend who was like a sister to me, or my only living relative, my dad again. My dad lost everything, and everything was taken from me.

... Just what is the meaning of my life?

As I was thinking about that, I heard rustling from the trees beside me.

After that was a burst of 'Purururu'... That was definitely a grunt of a wild beast.

I stayed on the ground and slowly moved my gaze towards it.

From the shadows of the trees, there was a pair of crimson eyes burning.

What the... is a ghost or demon going to come out?

It might look like a tropical paradise here, but maybe this wasn't heaven, but hell?

I couldn't help thinking that those eyes look hostile.

Give me a break. I don't remember doing anything bad in my previous life.

I got up slowly, trying my best to not agitate that thing.

And then—— that thing appeared slowly.

Uwah...

It was a wild boar.

Or something that looked like a wild boar.

That creature was a quadruped that looked like a boar with a giant body weighing roughly 90kg..

Its brown bristles that looked black were as hard as steel wires, and its mane extend from its head all the way to its back like a punk head.

It had short limbs, but they were very thick.

Two sharp tusk protrude out, flanking its flat nose.

Beady eyes were on either side of its face.

Its large round body was short and fat.

The more I looked at it, the more it looked like a boar.

But it wasn't a boar after all.

Because it had a pair of ivory horns protruding out from its forehead, which were as long as the tusks growing out from its jaw.

「... Uwah!」

I caught a glance of its hind legs kicking off the ground, and it charged at me.

From what I knew, boar could reach up to speeds of 40 km/h, but what about this guy?

As far as I know, boars were omnivorous, but it didn't have the habit of eating live prey, what about this guy? I thought as I ran with all my might.



I had a hectic time running around when I was still alive, and I still need to run when I'm dead?

I'm dead, so I didn't need to be afraid. But being stabbed by the sharp horns and tusk of beasts would probably be more painful than my cheeks being pinched.

And so, I was running for my life like a headless chicken.

With no time to look back, I jumped over shrubs, brushed aside branches as I weaved through the trees, running forward without stopping.

I ran and ran -- and catastrophe struck again.

「Uwahhhh!」

The ground sunk rapidly.

It was a trap hole.

The world started spinning and I felt dull pain all over my body.

I fell into the depths of the hole in confusion.

「That hurts.... Damn it, what the hell, that hurts!」

My body laid prone at the bottom of the hole, and I lifted my head.

The forest scenery looked as if it had been cut into a circular shape. It looked roughly 3 metres deep.

If this was dug by humans, it was impressive work.

「Damn it! This joke is going too far. Really...」

Fortunately, that boar like creature didn't fall into the hole with me. I kept the Santoku knife I was holding tightly in my right hand into my shirt, and tried to stand up.

That instant, I felt a burning pain in my right ankle.

I seemed to have sprained my ankle when I fell.

I was thrown into the depths of the forest in a state of confusion, ran into an unknown creature that chased after me. In the end, I fell into a hole and sprained my leg.

This was the worst bullshit. The situation was so bad that I couldn't help laughing.

「No, now isn't the time to laugh!」

As this was not the time to laugh, I tried getting mad.

「Damn it all! I don't know if you are a god or the devil, but what did I do wrong!? Are my sins really that grave? The way I died might not be worth boasting about, but I don't remember doing anything that deserve such harsh punishment! If you have a problem with me, then banish me to an even harsher hell!」

「... You're a really noisy man.」

I was surprised, as if someone had hit the back of my head with a metal baseball bat.

In the circular piece of sky above my head, a dark figure appeared.

「... Why're you being so noisy in a place like this?」

The other party spoke with a tone of a man, but sounded like a young woman.

Her voice was a little deep and hoarse. Her tone might be cold, but it sounded nice to me.

Sparse sunlight through the branches illuminated her from behind, which made it hard for me to discern her face.

So humans exist in this world too. I felt relieved, and decided to reply first:

「As you can see, I fell into a hole. I don't know who dug this hole or why they did it, but this prank has gone too far.」

After a moment of silence, the girl said with an even colder tone:

「... This trap is set by me.」

「Eh?」

「I can't fill my stomach even if I catch a human. This is meant to trap Kiba beasts. You know how much effort I put into digging this hole?」

「Eh? No, this is... my bad? Should I apologize to you?」

「.....」

「Hmm, but I'm really sorry about messing up your work. I will apologize to you, so could you help me out of this hole?」

「... It's just this deep, you should be able to climb out yourself.」

That figure seemed to be leaving, so I continued in a hurry:

「No, I actually sprained my ankle when I fell! It's not that serious, but I can't get out by myself. Sorry to trouble you, but can you lend me a hand?」

「... Who cares. Just starve to death here.」

That figure vanished.

「Wait! That's too cruel! Hey, save me!」

She didn't answer.

Was she really planning to leave me to die?

「Hey! Please! I will really starve to death here! If you have even a little bit of conscience left, then come back!」

「... You're a really noisy man.」

I couldn't see her, but I definitely heard that girl's voice.

After that, something weird fell in.

It was vines growing all over the forest.

Five of them were bundled together. I gave it a tug, and it felt really secured.

「... Hurry and climb up.」

Huh, so she was planning to rescue me from the very start.

What a cheeky girl. In modern terms, she was a 「Tsundere」.

No matter what, I felt her compassion, and considering the strange situation I was in, her actions made me even more grateful. *I should give my sincere thanks once I climbed up.* I thought as I stepped onto the wall.

My sprained ankle still stung, but it wasn't unbearable. Although the crumbling dirt made it hard to scale, I still climbed with all my might.

But... this situation is really confusing.

If this was hell, why would a savior appear when I was at a loss? That was strange.

What I felt through my senses were very realistic too, just like when I was alive. I couldn't tell that 「I was really dead.」

Nevermind, things would sort themselves out in the end. With the last bit of my strength, I finally reach the surface.

I escaped the hole safely.

Nightfall was probably imminent, and the surroundings were turning dark.

「That hurts... Thank you. For saving my life.」

I collapsed onto the grass, and lowered my head in thanks to the girl saviour who rescued me.

That girl stood with feet apart, crossing her arms as she waited for me. She then quietly pointed the thing in her hand towards my nose.

It was a sabre, with a glint in its silver blade.

Part 2

「So, who exactly are you?」

The glimmering sabre stopped right before the tip of my nose.

This sabre was no joke, 80cm long and 10cm wide. It was ruggedly made, as if it was modified from a hatchet. Even so, the blade was grinded to a razor sharp edge. With this sabre, she could probably cut through the bones and sinews of her prey.

Now wasn't the time to be impressed.

「W-What's the matter? Greeting me like this suddenly is dangerous! I already told you that I will apologize for messing up your trap!」

「Shut up. Hurry up and answer my question.」

The girl was calm and collected... But her cool demeanor was making me afraid.

I sighed, and alternated my gaze between the girl's face and the sabre's blade.

「I want to ask you first, where is this place? This doesn't feel like the world after death...」

「This is the foot of Mount Morga, called Forest's Edge².」

「... Mount Morga?」

「This is Western Kingdom Selva, territory of Duke Genos... Where the hell did you come from?」

I was completely lost.

But I could only answer honestly.

「I came from a country named Japan. Chiba prefecture of Japan. Do you know?」

「Japan... Chiba prefecture...?」

She never heard of that before. How could she have?

This world had nothing in common with 「Japan」 in all sorts of ways.

In the world I lived in, boars didn't have horns and girls wouldn't walk around with huge blades on them. Furthermore, that girl's looks —— I had never seen someone who looked that way.

Her skin tone was dark, as brown as dark chocolate.

But her hair was dark blonde.

And her eyes were deep blue.

That girl's brownish blonde hair was very long, and was tied up with straps into a strange pattern. In the dim light, her blue eyes looked strong and sharp.

Her facial features were well proportioned.

The corners of her eyes were raised a little, like those of a cat's. She had a thin nose and small pink lips —— the lines around her cheeks were soft, making her look young. She should be about my age.

Her looks were really outstanding.

I wouldn't hesitate in calling her stunningly gorgeous.

Personally, I think her brown skin matched with her pink lips looked really sexy.

But what was with her attire?

A thick fur cape draped down her shoulders —— cloth with beautiful patterns were wrapped around her chest and waist.

The intrinsic patterns on these two pieces of cloth didn't feel cheap at all, but her dressing was a little too sexy.

Aside from her clothes, she had a necklace filled with beast horns or tusks. She had bangles of nuts on her wrist, and a sheathed knife hung on her shapely waist. Those were all that she wore, and the rest of her smooth brown skin were laid bare. There were some strap-like things on her feet, which should be shoes.

Even though this mesmerizing and scantily clad girl was standing before me, my only thoughts were 「She sure is scary」.

Although her facial features were cute, her expression was fierce.

A fire burned in her eyes, and just like a real cat, her cute lips were pursed together tightly.

She was tall for a girl, and appeared rather slender.

But she didn't feel weak at all.

The girl showed her arms, legs, shoulders and abdomen, and they were as tight as a whip, without a single bit of fat. There were also plenty of white scars on her skin, which reflected how tough her life had been.

She was filled with powerful strength, or should I say primal life force. Modern men had become slaves to technology, and would never exhibit such power.

Even so——

What was that smell?

My heart was filled with questions when I came face to face with this extraordinary girl.

It was a complicated fragrance.

A bitter sweet smell, akin to completely ripe fruits.

It had a mysterious feel to it at the same time, like budding flowers on the verge of blooming.

The fragrance was refreshing and soothing, just like herbs.

But it had a violent nature, like a strong spice.

It also smelled like the meat and oil of animals, a bloody scent.

These scents mixed together in a complicated matter, stimulating my nasal cavity.

I didn't want to brag, but since I was young, my dad let me apprentice in the kitchen, so my sense of smell was more keen than others. More importantly, this smell was making me hungry... When I thought this far, my body seemed to know what I was thinking, and my stomach growled.

The girl's raised blade wavered a little.

「What are you scheming?」

「I'm not scheming anything... I'm just hungry.」

My stomach rumbled again.

How unsightly.

The girl raised her beautiful brow, and showed a ferocious face.

「Hey, stop kidding around. Are you making fun of me?」

「I'm not kidding. This is a normal body reaction, I can't help it. Because you have a delicious scent, so my stomach is reacting.」

「What do you mean? I don't have any food on me. Because of you, I couldn't get anything today.」

「Well, I will apologize for wasting your efforts...」

My stomach went 「Growl」 again, overlapping with the ending of my sentence.

My stomach was making too much noise.

Sigh, this was bad. The girl scowled her face further, and her shoulders started trembling.

Was I going to face death again for such a dumb reason?

「Anyway, I have no intention of making trouble on your turf. I got left in this place with no idea what is happening. I'm confused too. If you don't like it, I can leave right away...」 「Growl!」

This was really bad.

No matter how sincere my apology was, my stomach kept interrupting me.

As I was thinking all that—— the girl suddenly turned her head.

Her right hand was still threatening me with her sabre, but she was covering her mouth with her left hand.

Her shoulders were trembling harder.

「... What's the matter?」 「Growl?」

Her blade drooped onto the ground.

The girl's face was blushed.

「Hey? Are you feeling unwell?」 「Growl? Growl growl?」

「Pfft」, the girl made a strange sound.

She was staring at me through the tears in her eyes.

「Enough... Stop that...」

Even her voice was turning weak.

That worried me even more.

「Even if you ask me to stop...」 「Growl. Growl growl growl...」

The girl sat down on her butt with her hand still on the hilt of the sabre.

She then started laughing out loud, 「Bwahahaha!」

Ara, her smiling face looked so cute.

So she was just trying to hold back her laughter just now.

After she laughed for a while, she wiped away her tears and stood up. She pointed her sabre at me and spit out these words:

「... I will kill you.」

「Why?!」

I was still sitting on the ground, and backed away in a panic.

But the maw of the hole I crawled out from earlier was still waiting behind me.

The steel blade inched towards my nose.

「This is the most shameful moment of my life... I will definitely kill you.」

Even in the night, I could see that her face was beet red.

Was this her feeling of shame? Or the ultimate in tsundere? That couldn't be!

No matter what, I couldn't die here.

When my hand touched the edge of the hole, I raised both hands in surrender.

「If my obnoxious stomach hurt your pride, I apologize! This is all the fault of my stomach being empty! Speaking of which, I haven't ate since noon!」

「.....」

「I'm really confused! I don't know where I am, and why I'm here, all of this just confuses me! I am completely befuddled, if you kill me, then why the hell did I...」

Why did I jump into the sea of flames at the cost of my life?

When I thought about that, my throat tightened and the words didn't come out.

I was at a loss, and could only look back at the girl.

There was a sort of glint in the girl's blue eyes, as if she was looking at an unfathomable creature.

「... I don't understand what you're saying either.」

She lowered her blade a little.

「Aren't you a citizen of the Rock City?」

「Rock City? Like I said, my home is a country named Japan.」

「... I have never heard of a country by that name. So, you're not a citizen under Genos' rule huh.」

The girl finally lowered her blade after saying that.

But the doubt and suspicion in her eyes lingered.

However... I felt a complicated wavering emotion that seemed to be hidden behind her fierce eyes.

「... Tell me more.」

The girl said softly.

「Let's head to my place. If you are not willing to come, I will leave you here.」

「... You're willing to bring a man of unknown origin like me home?」

「Night is falling. I don't have time to answer your question here... Let me tell you first, if you don't prepare a fire beforehand, you will lose your life if you stay inside the forest.」

The girl picked up the leather sheath she dropped by her feet, and sheathed her sabre. I looked at the girl's majestic figure, then propped myself up with my hands and stood up.

「I understand, I will do as you say... By the way, I haven't introduce myself. I'm Tsurumi Asuta.」

「Suroomi... Yazuka?」

「No, Tsurumi Asuta.」

「Choorumi Yasuka.....」

She was too cute.

Because the subject was saying this with a serious face, she looked even cuter.

「Hmm. If it's difficult for you to pronounce, just Asuta would do. What's your name?」

「.....Ai Fa.」

She left her name and turned her back to me.

She had a slender body, but she was shorter than me. Around 167-168 cm.

She was about average height, thin and slender, so how did she lift that scary sabre with just one hand? Maybe she had different muscle or bone density, and the structure of her body was unlike any people I know.

As I was thinking leisurely about all that, the girl glared at me sideways.

「What are you doing? Don't your feet hurt? Hold onto my shoulder.」

「Huh, is that fine?」

「Time is precious, hurry up.」

I was a little hesitant, but I still put my right arm over Ai Fa's right shoulder.

The next second, she elbowed my chest.

「I didn't tell you to put your arm around me. I just told you to grab my shoulder.」

「Uwah... I see.」

I patted my chest softly as I grabbed Ai Fa's left shoulder with my right hand.

I wasn't hurt that badly, so this was enough to help me walk.

The girl was wearing a thick fur cape anyway, so I could only feel the rough sensation of her cape.

「... You're hiding a knife in your chest?」

「Eh?」

I stopped in surprise.

When I put my arm around her, my chest lightly brushed her back. She could feel that even through such a thick piece of hide?

Compared to her elbow to my chest, this reaction was much scarier.

「You noticed in that short amount of time? I have no intention of harming you, so don't worry.」

「Why do I need to worry? If you want to hack me down, you can give it a try.」

Ai Fa glanced back at me, and said with an icy gaze:

「But if you tried that, I will cut your windpipe ahead of you. If you think I'm bluffing, you're free to try me... Asuta.」

Part 3

And hence, Ai Fa and I advanced through the forest in the evening.

It was almost night fall, and the surroundings were dark.

「All because you wasted so much of my time. We need to leave the Kiba beasts' activity zone quickly.」

My hand was on Ai Fa's left shoulder as I took care not to strain my sprained right ankle and inched forward. I asked back: 「Kiba beast?」

「You set that trap in order to catch those things? Are you referring to that boar like creature?」

「... Boar?」

「Yes. Dark skin, round and stout with horns...」

「That's a Kiba beast, you saw one? 」

「I saw one, or rather, it was chasing me. That's why I fell into that trap.」

「How laughable. When a Kiba beast is attacking you, you should climb up tall trees. That's common sense.」

「Like I said, I don't know such common sense.」

I said as I looked at the shoulder I was holding.

「I want to ask, is that fur cape made from the hide of a Kiba beast? 」

「Of course. I'm a denizen of Forest's Edge. People of the Forest's Edge will routinely hunt Kiba beast, eat their meat and make a living selling their horns, tusks and hide.」

Ai Fa carefully pulled aside the shrugs, and glared at me with annoyed eyes.

「... And those citizens of Rock City, mock us, the people of Forest's Edge as 《Kiba eater》.」

「Hmm? But why? Boars are delicious.」

I wasn't trying to brag, but during winter break during my second year in middle school, I participated in a farm life experience organized by hunting hobbyists, and butchered boars and deer over there. The boar stew I ate back then was absolutely delicious.

「... It's not a 『boar』, it's Kiba beast. Kiba beast meat are tough and smelly. They say the people of Forest's Edge who eats the Kiba beast, have the same stench.」

「You're not smelly at all, your smell is very fragrant.」

Ai Fa's eyes looked even more unhappy.

Well, girls around this age were hard to handle.

For the sake of Ai Fa's reputation, I need to make it clear that she didn't just smell like meat and oil. Her scent was mainly that of bitter sweet fruits and refreshing herbs, which complement the fragrance of the meat perfectly, and kept stimulating the part of my brain that control my hunger.

「But seriously, my sense of smell is really keen. Kiba beast must be delicious.」

「... There's no distinction of food being delicious or not.」

Ara, that was rude. I might still be apprenticing, but I was still a chef. Were those words a challenge against me?

But in this situation, it would be useless to preach about my world view. So I kept my mouth shut and focus on walking quietly.

We walked in the forest like this for about 15 minutes—— Suddenly, my field of vision became wide.

We walked out of the forest.

The sun was about to set.

The orange light illuminated the settlement in the valley.

Ah... So people really lived in this world.

I was overwhelmed.

The surrounding was dark, so I couldn't see very clearly, but this stony clearing was made by clearing the forest, and wooden houses were spread sparsely across the place. Red light could be seen inside those lodgings, and white smoke from the cooking of dinner rose into the sky.

... See, don't it smell delicious?

The fragrance from the protein of meat and spices melded into the air.

In order to not agitate Ai Fa, I tried my best to suppress my stomach's growling.

「It feels serene outside the forest, not bad. Roughly how many people live here?」

「How would I know... Probably less than five hundred.」

「Five hundred? This is an enormous settlement. I couldn't tell that there're so many families.」

「... The settlement where the people of Forest's Edge live is a strip of land stretching from the north to the south, between Mount Morga and Genos' territory. It would take at least half a day to travel from one end of the forest to the other.」

I see, as the land was narrow, there would be quite a distance between each houses. It's more comfortable to live with less people, but I think the way the houses were spread didn't really fit with the term 「settlement」. I tried asking for more information, but an unexpected guest appeared.

「Yo, Ai Fa. Where did this weakling come from?」

A low male voice interjected suddenly.

That surprised me, but Ai Fa just clicked her tongue softly.

「... None of your business, Diga Tsun.」

「Of course it's my business. The Tsun House is the ruler of everyone in Forest's Edge.」

A large figure approached swiftly.

It was a young man who was dressed similarly to Ai Fa.

He was tall and well built. I apologize, but I could only use the measurements in my world to describe it, and he was about 180 cm. His frame and muscles were lean, and was about 80 kg in weight.

His dark brown hair was cut really short, with light brown skin and a pair of blue eyes. Aside from hair colour, he was similar to Ai Fa.

He had a fur cape on his huge body and cloth material, and a large sabre as well as a knife on his waist. A large number of beast tusks and horns hung from his neck, many more than Ai Fa.

He blocked our path, stopping us from advancing and observed me without reservation.

「Hmmp, your clothes are really weird. Where do you live?」

His voice was rough, but he spoke slowly. Listening to him felt uncomfortable.

Although his eye colour was similar to Ai Fa, his eyes looked murky.

He was the second human I encountered in this different world, but I don't feel any good will towards him.

As far as I could remember, I had been helping out with my family business. If a punk like that could rustle my jimmies, that meant I didn't have what it takes to be a business man's son. With that in mind, I wanted to be as friendly as I could——

「none of your business.」 Ai Fa said before I could reply.

「Let me tell you, Diga Tsun, I don't owe anything to the Tsun House. Not just that, you keep finding trouble with me. I don't want to talk to you at all. Take your useless big body with you and disappear from my sights.」

「What did you say...」

Although that man's face turned stiff, Ai Fa continued:

「Diga Tsun, if you have a problem with me, we can have a duel any time. If you don't want to, then don't show yourself before me again. You are an eyesore.」

Ai Fa walked away briskly after saying her piece.

As I needed to hold on to her shoulder, I had to keep up with her with a jog. That young man was trembling from anger, and when I passed by him, I still nodded in greeting.

「You ostracized weirdo! You better watch your back, and don't get mistaken for a Kiba beast and get your head hacked off!」

The voice of the man who lost his composure echoed throughout the entire foot of the mountain.

His yell completely spoiled the poetic scenery.

「Can I ask you a question? An outsider like me shouldn't be asking this, but shouldn't you have cordial relations with your neighbours?」

「... The night my father passed away, that man Diga Tsun ambushed me in my room, and planned to assault me. So after I beat him off, I threw him into the river.」

「.....」

「Because he will be the next Tribal Chief, everyone think I was the one that shamed him. No one in the settlement is willing to have anything to do with me... You want me to have cordial relations with such a person?」

「I take that back. I shouldn't have nodded at him. Should I give him a punch?」

After I said that, I relaxed my grip on Ai Fa's shoulder and stopped. The next instant, Ai Fa grabbed my right wrist tightly.

Her slender but powerful fingers dug into my hand.

「What idiocy are you saying, such a man is not worth your time to beat up.」

「But you have been shamed because of him, right? That is too unfair.」

「I am not living in shame. I don't like interacting with people outside my family anyway, so this is more relaxing.」

She looked at me with anger, her blue eyes had the strong light of righteousness in them, the man just now couldn't hold a candle to her.

「However, since I brought you to the settlement, I would need to take responsibility if you harm anyone from House Tsun. I might get exiled by the settlement because of that... You want me to live in the wild?」

「Ah... That's true. I'm sorry, I didn't consider your position. I'm probably hungry, that's why I got angry so easily.」

After saying that, my stomach seemed to agree with me and made 「growling」 sounds.

Ai Fa was still grabbing my hand, and her shoulders started trembling again.

「... You're doing that on purpose? You want me to dump you into the river too?」

「I-I'm not good enough to make my stomach growl on command. By the way, if you want to laugh, just laugh.」

「Shut up!」

Ai Fa let go of my hand and walked off in large strides.

I grabbed her left shoulder in a hurry.

I watched her ears and the nape of her neck that was completely red, and thought about something trivial —— 「The humans in this world are the same too, their body feels warm」 .

Part 4

After walking for another 10 minutes, we reached Ai Fa's residence.

Like the other lodgings, Ai Fa had a wooden house built on even grounds with some shrubs around it.

From what I observed on the way here, all the houses were rather far apart. But Ai Fa's house was exceptionally isolated. It was so quiet that it was discomfoting.

However, from Ai Fa's wild attire and the words 「Denizens of Forest's Edge」 , I thought her residence would be more primitive. On a closer look, the style of the house was unexpectedly nice.

「Oh, your place isn't too bad.」

It wasn't as fashionable as a cabin in a vacation resort, but this house was built delicately with bare boards and logs, and was spacious and felt cool. The space alone could match 『Restaurant Tsurumi』 .

As the sky had darkened, I couldn't observe too clearly. Anyway, the special thing about this house was its roof that tilt slightly from left to right. It seemed to be made timber-frame construction, without using any nails or screws.

A ditch about 50 cm wide and deep was dug around the building, with a log bridging it leading right to the entrance. Was it used to stop wild animals from entering? Or drainage for rain? I started to think.

「... What are you doing? Hurry on in.」

「That's right, sorry sorry.」

The door at the entrance was a horizontal sliding door that felt really Japanese.

I followed behind the Mistress of the House and entered timidly.

「Sorry for intruding...」

It was darker inside the house.

However, I could still tell that it was really spacious.

The floor was covered with brown fur. Ai Fa took off her leather slippers at the entrance, and I followed her lead.

I didn't know what to do about my socks, but I think it wouldn't matter even if I don't wear them, so I took them off.

I walked barefooted on the rough fur, and it felt a little itchy.

A heavy thud came from behind me.

Ai Fa had barricaded the door to the entrance with a large piece of wood.

No one will rescue me no matter how much I scream now.

I prayed in my heart that it wouldn't be necessary to do that, and surveyed the room again.

The room was rectangular, about 12 tatami³ in size. The walls to the left and right had large windows. And of course, the windows didn't have things like glass, but it did have thin vertical wooden bars about 20 cm apart, which served as a window grill.

The inside of the house was separated by a wall, and I could see three doors.

The ceiling was high and the supporting beams could be seen in clear sight. Like what I saw outside, the roof was tilted slightly to the right. I wasn't sure, but this design was probably meant to block out the elements.

However... To be honest, instead of the visual information, I was more interested in what my nose was telling me.

Of the complicated fragrance on this girl, there were three of them that lingered in the house strongly.

They were the scent of meat, spice and herbs.

「... Does your leg still hurt?」

「Eh? It's not a big deal. It feels hot, but there's no swelling. Even if it's not treated, it should heal by tomorrow.」

「... I see.」

Ai Fa walked to the middle of the room and seemed to be thinking.

「I want to ask you some things, but I'm hungry too. I will prepare dinner.」

「Please go ahead... Erm, I have no way of repaying you, but can I have dinner with you?」

3 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatami>

「... If your stomach keeps rumbling, how can I ask you anything? 」

She didn't need to say that through gritted teeth though.

But since she was treating me to a meal without asking for anything in return, I was very grateful. With the fragrance in the house, I might faint if she forbid me from eating.

So, dinner preparation was beginning. The moment I stepped into the house, I immediately confirmed the space that served as a kitchen, which was the area near the window to the right.

It was a square about 2m in each direction. That was the only place that didn't have any fur rug, and had white stones covering the ground. And yellow stones formed a trapezoid base right over there.

The base reached to about my waist, and there was an empty black hole right at its front. And on top of that base was —— A black gleaming metal pot.

It's design might be simple, but this base was definitely a 「stove」⁴.

Beside the stove was bundles of small wood, which was probably firewood.

So this house had an in built kitchen.

Everyone cooks together and eat together. That might be their custom.

However —— In this spacious house, there was just me and Ai Fa.

「By the way, are your family away? 」

「... I already told you that my father is dead. My mother on the other hand has been dead for a long time.」

There was a water jug beside the stove. Ai Fa scooped used a long ladle to scoop up water and pour it into the pot as she spoke.

I still didn't know the common sense and reasoning of this world, and could only answer 「I see」.

While we were talking, Ai Fa started the stove fire.

How did she do that? I should have watched her actions more carefully.

Anyway, the room was gradually turning brighter.

「... Why are you standing there? It's an eyesore, hurry up and sit.」

「Oh, well, where should I sit? I'm sorry, but I don't understand this land's culture and custom at all.」

4 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamado>

Ai Fa stood up and looked at me in surprise.

「It's just sitting down, what has that got to do with culture? You are a strange man.」

I noticed a small light between her hands, which intrigued me.

It was a small plate-like wick stand with a handle.

After the sabre and the pot, this wick stand was the third metal I saw in this world.

The fuel burning inside must be animal fats. A smell that stimulates my appetite started drifting inside the room.

Ai Fa walked through the room. After placing the wick stand at the left and right windows respectively, she slowly took off the fur cape she was wearing.

Ai Fa's body line was illuminated by the new light sources in the room —— I felt my heart pounding.

After all, she was just wearing the clothes covering her chest and waist right now. Aside from her necklace, her exposed skin was on the level of wearing a swimsuit or a lingerie.

She had a cold personality, but she was still a girl.

And a beauty at that.

Her body was slender, but looked well trained and was as lean as a whip. Her elegant body line was very feminine, and these two characteristics were perfectly compatible. How should I put this... she was beautiful and full of charm.

After taking off that crude cape, her attack power doubled.



「... Hey.」

「Yes! Is there anything!?!」

「Don't need to be so loud... Give me that thing in your chest.」

Ai Fa hung her cape onto the wall, leaned her sabre against the wall under the cape, and then glared at me.

「A weak man like you can't harm me even if you have a blade. But as a guest in someone's house, you have to deposit your blade with the owner. This is the rule of the people of Forest's Edge.」

I was dumbfounded.

Ai Fa narrowed her eyes and walked towards me with a dangerous aura about her.

That knife was still on her slender waist.

「I will say again, if you are sincere about following the rules of Forest's Edge, then give me that knife.」

「Wait, what you mean is... This custom is to confirm the trust between people?」

Ai Fa reached out her left hand towards me in silence.

After troubling over it for three seconds, I made my decision.

「I understand. But this is important to me. And instead of a hunting tool, it is meant for more delicate work, please use it with care, alright?」

「... Are you mocking me? Everyone in Forest's Edge treats blades with care.」

「No, that's not what I mean. I'm saying that you need to be careful when using that knife. It is hard to repair the blade if it is damaged. If you understand, I will hand it over to you.」

I took out the Santoku Knife that was in front of my collar, and handed it to Ai Fa handle first.

Ai Fa looked at the black knife handle, and she was the one who stopped this time.

「...Is this knife a memento from your late parents?」

「Yes, you can say that.」

The one who died was actually me, but it was certain that I won't see my dad ever again.

Ai Fa took the Santoku knife, and walked deep into the house with it clutched tightly in her arms.

「... Everyone in Forest's Edge cherishes their family.」

She muttered and opened the rightmost door, and disappeared behind it.

When Ai Fa came out, the Santoku knife was no longer in her arms, and was replaced by a large number of foodstuff.

I walked to the stove curiously.

After getting closer to the pot, I realized the size of the pot was incredible.

The pot had a round bottom, diameter about 60 cm wide and 30 cm deep. It was a deep pot, like a sphere being cut right in half.

The pot was half full, and was about to boil.

「What's the matter? Preparation will take some time, just sit down somewhere.」

「I'm interested in the food culture of this world. After all, that's my family business.」

Ai Fa was doubtful, but she didn't say anything and placed the ingredients by my feet.

「Oh, it feels rather luxurious.」

There were two unfamiliar vegetables.

One had a green luster, but the size was really close to an onion.

What about the other? It was a ball about the size of a fist with an uneven surface. If I really had to describe it, it looked a little like a potato. But it was cream color and didn't have any stems, so it wasn't vegetable dug up from the ground.

However —— A thick piece of meat overwhelmed the presence of these vegetables.

The meat was probably from the hind leg of that creature called Kiba beast.

It was cut off from the hip joint area. It probably wasn't the first cut, but there were still plenty of it to go around, and that piece alone was at least five kg.

Ai Fa had already cut off the hide, and she sprinkled something that looked like black sawdust, which had a strong fragrance of black pepper. That was definitely a spice serving as a preservative.

Beneath the meat was a large leaf that was as large as a banana leaf. Only the meat was placed on top of that smooth leaves, the other vegetables were placed directly on the floor.

Tonight's dinner was definitely filling enough.

「... How is this luxurious? You don't understand the daily lives of Forest's Edge at all.」

Ai Fa muttered disinterestedly and picked up that meat.

Holding it by the trotter, she lowered the meat into the steaming pot.

She isn't going to dump the entire thing in right? As I stared at her, she drew out the knife from her waist and started slicing the Kiba beast's meat.

She slowly sliced the surface of the meat, like the hawker selling Shawarma⁵ in the streets.

The thin slices of meat fell into the hot water.

Ai Fa seemed to be prioritizing in cutting away the place covered in spice. The red meat beneath the spice was gradually exposed.

No matter how I looked at it, that knife was a hunting knife, but it was very sharp.

The blade of the knife was about 20 cm long, 7 to 8 mm thick and the back of the blade had jagged teeth. The appearance of the blade was just like a survival knife.

Like the sabre the hilt of the knife was wrapped in leather that prevent slippage, but had no guards.

She sliced thin pieces of meat with that hunting knife, what a pure cooking method.

I was the heir of an economical priced restaurant after all. I wasn't interested in high class dishes, and I wouldn't mind what method they used to cook, as long as it was hygienic.

The most important thing about food was it's tastiness.

In order to let the diner enjoy the food, we would be mindful of its presentation. Because no matter how delicious the dishes were, it was meaningless if it was harmful to the body. That was why we emphasize on hygiene during cooking.

To express my thoughts in simple terms —— Just looking at Ai Fa's practiced movement as she sliced the meat made me hungrier.

「... Why do you look so happy?」

「Eh? I just think this looks delicious.」

「... There's no distinction of food being delicious or not.」

Ai Fa said something rude again and covered the pot with a lid. I called it a lid, but it was just a rectangular piece of board. She put a rock on top of the board.

The Kiba beast's leg meat still had plenty of meat on it, so Ai Fa put it back into the food store. After checking the fire, she nodded with an 「Hmm」.

She then turned to me.

「The meat will be cooked in a while... Before that, let me ask you questions.」

5 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shawarma>

Part 5

「That's right, listening to my story after the meal might not be good for digestion. Let's get the troublesome matters out of the way first.」

When she heard my reply, Ai Fa sat down beside the stove with a hmmp.

She sat down crossed legged, with one knee propped up.

Ai Fa's sitting posture looked authoritative, but girls who were dressed so scantily weren't suited for such a posture.

「... I will relax a little too, alright?」

After announcing that, I unbuttoned my apron.

The temperature here was similar to early summer in Japan. Adding the fire that was going, it was rather hot.

But after taking off the top half of my chef uniform and apron, I only had a T-shirt on me. The night breeze blowing in through the windows felt really comfortable.

「... Your attire is really weird. I had never seen such clothing even in the Post Station Town⁶.」

「Hmm, well, it's the same for me. I have never seen someone dressed like you before.」

I faced Ai Fa and sat cross legged like her on the rough fur.

「Well? What do you want to ask me? To be honest, I don't understand my situation too, so I'm not confident that I could explain things clearly though.」

「... Where did you come from?」

This was the second time she asked me that.

I'm from a country named Japan, from Chiba prefecture in Japan... Even if I explain it that way, I wouldn't be able to continue.

Ai Fa's eyes had a gleam like a cat in the darkness. I looked at her and said:

「Ai Fa, not only did you saved me, you even brought me to your house as a guest. Thank you for bringing me home, I'm very thankful for your compassionate actions. What I'm about to say do not contain a shred of falsehood.」

Ai Fa tilted her head, as if she was asking 「And so?」

6 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shukuba>

「So, I will tell you the entire truth. I will let you decide whether you believe me or not.」

I was confused myself, but I still told her everything.

I lived for seventeen years in a country that was relatively peaceful.

One day, a catastrophe happened, and I had to jump into a sea of fire.

I thought I was dead, but I unexpectedly woke up unscathed in that forest just now.

It might look similar to my world, but everything was fundamentally different.

「... considering the possibility, maybe I am still in my own world, but ended up in an completely unknown place. I should be dead, so being still alive should be the biggest question. No, even if I ignore that, there are too many contradictions.」

I tried telling her the questions clouding my head.

「For example, the language I'm using now. Ai Fa, have you heard of a country named Japan before?」

「... Never heard of it.」

「Hmm, just this point confused me. If you never heard of Japan, then it's impossible for you to be fluent in Japanese. So how are we communicating so smoothly?」

「.....」

「Aside from the people in Forest's Edge, there are the Rock city and Western Kingdom, right? How large are these nations?」

「... I have never visited Rock City or other cities, so I don't know. I have only visited the Post Station town outside the Rock City in order to sell the Kiba beast's horns and tusk, I learn everything I know through hearsay.」

At this point, Ai Fa groaned a little and said quietly:

「I remember... there are several thousand people living in the castle town inside the stone walls, that's the territory of the Western Kingdom Selva. I heard that Selva's citizens living in their towns are as numerous as the stars...」

「I see. The scale is quite large... Do you know which gods the people in Rock City worship?」

Ai Fa looked surprised when she heard my question.

「Do you even need to ask? The citizens of Selva worships the God of the West Selva of course. There are four major kingdoms in Amusehorn continent. Similar to the four kingdoms, there are four major gods. Without the protection of the four major gods, the people of Amusehorn won't

be able to survive. If the people lose their faith in the gods, they would be reduced to mere beasts... Asuta, are you telling me you don't know such common sense?」

「Unfortunately, I really didn't know. I have never heard of this continent, these Kingdoms or these gods.」

I smiled wryly and scratched my head that was wrapped in a towel.

「Be it a tribe of 500 hunters or horned boars, if I never heard of such trivial matters, it would probably be due to my ignorance, and had never dabbled into such fields... But that explanation wouldn't work now. It's regrettable, but I have made my conclusion.」

I didn't place much hope in that small possibility in the first place, so it wasn't a huge let down.

However, this means I couldn't see my dad or childhood friend again, and the reality of that hit me again.

I looked into Ai Fa's blue beautiful eyes and said:

「I will tell you the conclusion I made... Maybe it's the whim of the gods or some other reason, but I got thrown into this world from mine. Maybe the gods pulled some tricks, allowing me to communicate with you so smoothly.」

「.....」

「I don't know if this is far into the past or the distant future, or a parallel world that represent one of the possibility of my world, or this is an entirely different world... simply put, this isn't the world I grew up in.」

「.....」

「I'm a human who came from another world.」

After saying this unfamiliar term, I shrugged depressedly.

「Or I hit my head, and is retarded enough to treat my delusion as reality. I think these are the only two answers.」

「... You admit that you are crazy?」

「I don't think so. To me, the seventeen years of my life is my everything. If they are delusions, then my existence would be a lie.」

I gulp down the sigh I was about to exhale, and said with conviction.

I had no other choice but to accept this.

「Just to be sure, let me ask you one thing. Aside from me, no one else encountered the same thing, right? Did the people who died in my world all transported here...?」

「Such a retarded thing is impossible.」

「That's true. If there is such a system, this world would be flooded by people.」

I mimicked Ai Fa and propped up one knee, placing my arm on my knee and supported my cheek.

「That's all I can tell you. I will let you judge for yourself.」

「... I understand.」

After Ai Fa glared at me one last time, she stood up slowly.

「... Well then, it's almost time.」

「Hmm?」

「The meat is almost done.」

Ai Fa then picked up the rock on top of the lid and took the lid off.

A white mist spew out from the pot.

「Uwah, it smells delicious.」

I stood up hurriedly and looked into the pot over Ai Fa's shoulder.

The soup and meat pieces were moving inside the pot.

A large amount of steam kept coming out from the pot, and plenty of foam appeared. There was so much bubbles, as though a bar of soap had been tossed in there.

「... I know dinner is important, but don't you have other questions?」

When she heard me, Ai Fa glared at me from up close.

「You're either from another world, or a lunatic who completely believes in your delusion... I know this two things.」

「Even though you say that, but are you willing to believe something so incredible?」

「... At the very least, I know that you have no intention of deceiving me.」

Ai Fa averted her face and picked up the vegetable by her feet. It was that onion like object.

When she cut open that vegetable, the bright green insides could be seen. The entire thing felt just like an onion.

Ai Fa only peel off the dried outer skin, cut it in half and then tossed it into the pot.

「You don't look like a liar, so you're probably a lunatic.」

Thomp, thomp.

She tossed 5 to 6 fake onions into the pot.

This scene was just like a 「hot pot from hell」. I stared inside the pot and muttered 「Thank you」.

「What do you mean, you're happy to be called a lunatic?」

「That's right. Instead of being called a liar, I prefer being called a lunatic. And this means you believed me.」

「... I don't understand you at all.」

Ai Fa's voice had a hint of anger. She picked up the cream coloured fake potato this time. She then peeled it, and just toss it into the water after making a cut on its surface.

The pot was deep, but the foam almost reach the brim of the pot.

Ai Fa picked up a thick wooden rod and stirred the pot, and then glared at me with ferocious eyes.

「... So, what do you plan to do from now on?」

「Hmm? Do? What do you mean?」

「I mean what are your plans for the future? Do you want to search for a way to go back to your old world?」

「Well, should I really do that? If I return to my world, I might go back to that burning place. Turning into a ball of fire the moment I get back is as good as suicide.」

But if I could return the Santoku knife to my dad, it might be worth sacrificing my life. However, if I turn into a ball of fire, the Santoku knife would probably suffer the same fate.

「I still can't figure things out. Or rather, no matter how much I worry about it, I wouldn't be transported back to my world out of the blue. After all, I don't know how I triggered such an interesting phenomena, or the logic behind it in the first place. So I won't be fazed no matter what happens in the future.」

「... I see.」

「If you regret bringing a troublesome guy home, you can just tell me. I will leave right away. Fortunately, the weather is great, so it won't be too harsh to camp outside...」

「If you spent the night outside the house, you won't just be stomped to death by the Kiba beasts, your corpse will also become food for the wild beasts. By morning, only your bones would be left.」

Ai Fa said, as if she was trying to stop me from continuing.

「Also, Diga Tsun already saw you together with me. If a person who don't even know about the four major gods commit any serious taboos, I would need to take on the responsibility.」

「Eh? But then...」

「Just stay within my sights for now, and don't move around on your own.」

Ai Fa said in an unhappy tone. She stirred the metal pot, and looked just like the witch in fairy tales.

「At the very least, you need to remember the logic of this world and the rules of Forest's Edge. After remembering that, you can die out there if you wish.」

「I understand... Ai Fa, I'm very grateful.」

「Hey! Why are you thanking me at this moment for! Are you happy about me telling you to die out there?」

「I'm happy. At least you aren't chasing me out right now.」

I tried my best to make my tone sound less serious.

I then took a step away from Ai Fa.

If I continue to look at her from so close, I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to hold back and hug her.

That was how uneasy I felt about my future.

After losing everything, that was how much despair I was in.

But Ai Fa wanted me to stay here, and even said that I couldn't be a liar.

Despite the trials and tribulations fate had thrown at me, I was truly thankful that the first person I met in this world was such a caring girl who was also a little weird.

「... It's done.」

Ai Fa said in an unhappy tone and turned her back to me.

She disappeared behind the door in the middle. When she returned, she had two sets of bowls and spoons, and an oval ladle —— the utensils for 「soup」. And of course, all the utensils were made from wood.

The entire pot of soup were white from the heat and foam. Ai Fa used the ladle to scoop up soup and poured it into the containers, and passed it to me in silence.

「Thank you.」

I was filled with gratitude, but my stomach was empty.

I received the container gratefully and sat onto the fur rug.

As I waited for Ai Fa to prepare her own portion, I inspected the content of the container intriguingly.

It was a bowl of thick white soup.

It looked like butter clam chowder soup, but it had the fragrance of a boar stew.

I could catch a glimpse of the coffee colored meat and green vegetable through the snow white surface.

The fake onion broke down into an adequate size, while the fake potato —— was gone. It had completely dissolved in such a short amount of time?

Speaking of which, this bowl of soup, or rather, stock, was cream in colour, just like that fake potato.

They might look similar, but that isn't a real onion or potato, how does it taste?

Even though there was so much foam, Ai Fa didn't scoop them away, which made me concerned. But when in Rome, do what the Romans do. Even though the foam would affect the taste, it also held the essence of all the ingredients. There wasn't a need to get rid of them excessively.

This way probably has its own unique cooking method. A man from an alternate world like me is not in the position to say too much.

As I was thinking about that, Ai Fa sat down beside me.

「Why aren't you eating? Did you change your mind, and think that Kiba beast is unpalatable after all?」

「That's not it, in the world I was from, we have the tradition of everyone eating at the same time. This looked delicious.」

Ai Fa shrugged nonchalantly, and started muttering to herself, as if she was chanting a spell. She then started to eat.

Seeing her dig in, I also said 「Bon appetit」, and picked up my wooden spoon.

I scooped up the white soup together with the coffee coloured pieces of meat.

This was my first dinner in this other world.

Chapter 2 - The Morning in Another World

Part 1

That night, I had a dream.

It was my recollection of my participation of the farm life experience organized by the hunting hobby group.

That pot of boar stew was really delicious.

With white miso as the soup base, vegetables such as enoki mushrooms, shitake mushrooms, cabbage, carrot, burdock and yam were added in, and I couldn't taste the rumored boar stink at all. The meat were sliced thickly, but the texture of the boar were softer than pork, not too oily, so I could wolf it down no matter how much there was.

It was December back then, and winter break for me.

It was my first time experiencing what it was like for 「my freezing body to warm up from the inside」.

Before our meal, they taught us how to slaughter the boar.

I had only butchered chickens or ducks before this, so I was tensed and excited.

It might sound cliché, but that experience made me realize once again that 「so that's what goes behind the preparation of animal meat as food」.

Unfortunately, the butchered meat⁷ had to be put aside for several days for it to age. And so, the meat I ate was the boar prepared by the hunter hobbyist group in advance.

Even so, it was absolutely delicious.

The farm life experience was three nights of on-site camping. On the second night, dad and Rina came to visit me.

When she saw the boar I butchered, Rina almost fainted from anemia. But when we had boar stew for dinner, she ate almost as much as I did. I couldn't figure out whether Rina was really strong or really frail.

But there isn't any chance to butcher boar meat in our shop.

My dad said with a laugh.

I want to eat the meat Asuta-chan prepared!

⁷ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanging_\(meat\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanging_(meat))

Rina laughed too.

I was probably all smiles too back then.

Was there any meaning in closing the shop for three days to participate in the farm life experience? I was doubtful in the beginning, but I really enjoyed those three days, so it was meaningful for me.

「... Hey, wake up.」

I will be butchering a deer tomorrow.

When she heard me boasting about that, Rina's big sparkling eyes widened.

Can we eat venison? Isn't the deer pitiful?

How could that be? You ate so much boar meat, it's unfair to say that.

Eh? But boars are no different from pigs!

Rina puffed her cheeks angrily after saying that.

I told her that was the unfair part.

Have you looked at boars and pigs carefully before? If I have to said, I think they are cuter than deers.

Stop saying that! I won't be able to eat pork in the future if you say that!

The meat eating culture in many other countries were hard for Japanese to accept too. I wanted to tell her about that, but she looked so pitiful so I didn't.

「... Hey, just how long are you going to sleep. Wake up!」

So noisy.

Ah, speaking of which, the boar stew I ate back then was delicious.

The miso soup base was thick, so I wanted to try other method of cooking that could bring out the taste of the boar more clearly.

Soup stock made by cooking the bones of the boar must be incredible.

「I did ask you to stay in this house, but I have no intention of letting you laze around! Hey!」

Ara, someone was shaking my shoulders violently.

Leaving that aside for now, I probably like the unique taste of the meat.

I only had it a few times, but I like mutton a lot, and I had always like the smell of the fats on meat. I even wondered if I was a carnivore in my previous life.

It was the same for ramen, my favourite was Tonkotsu Shoyo Ramen⁸. Naturally, a bowl of ramen that was oily wouldn't be delicious, and I would pass on that too. But I intend to take over the family business, and I was already planning in secret to add Tonkotsu Ramen to the menu in the future.

「Hey... Don't get too cocky, you will get it from me.」

Right, this was the taste. Who said that Kiba beast stinks?

Hmm? No, what were Kiba beasts?

Anyway, this smells nice.

I was just feasting on pork stew, and I got hungry again.

After all, the dinner last night was horrendous.

These two words didn't really match though.

Forget it, doesn't matter.

Anyway, I'm hungry, so I will dig in first.

The meat felt rather tender, and stimulate my teeth and tongue comfortably. The next instant, a flash of white light exploded before my eyes.

「... Strange?」

It took some time before I understood the situation.

The fragrance of meat and spice stimulated my nasal cavity.

The morning sun light shone in through the windows.

The sensation of the rough fur rug.

Wooden walls and the ceiling where the beams were clearly visible.

Oh right, it had been one night since I came to this other world.

This wasn't my house. But the house of a Forest's Edge denizen, Ai Fa.

Right now, that Ai Fa had her arms crossed, and standing before me with her feet wide apart.

Her left palm was placed on her neck, her pretty face was blushing. She had drawn her knife and was pointing it at me. This was my benefactor, Ai Fa.

8 豚骨醤油ラーメン, pork bone soy sauce

「Wait... Wait! My meat definitely taste bad!」

I woke up immediately, and rolled to the wall behind me.

The steel blade shone brightly as it reflected the morning sun.

Ai Fa's right arm raised her knife high and was trembling, as if she was suppressing her agitated emotions.

「... I will kill you.」

「Why!? Why're you doing something so dangerous this early in the morning...」

As I yelled, I felt a dull pain on the top of my head.

Hmm? Speaking of which, someone seemed to have hit me while I was dreaming.

「Ah, were you the one who hit me? How mean, what are you thinking, hitting someone who is sleeping?」

「... Ask yourself.」

Ai Fa's cheeks were beet red from rage.

She was the same yesterday, acting all cool but angering so easily.

But on the other hand, she wasn't someone who would have an outburst for no reason, did I do something wrong?

「Sorry, but what did I do? I was groggy from my sleep and can't remember anything. If I did anything rude, please do forgive me.」



「... You did do something wrong.」

「Huh?」

「You tried to eat me!」

Ai Fa roared. This was the first time she spoke so loudly since we met. She raised the knife in her hand once again.

On her smooth neck she was covering moments ago — was a set of healthy looking teeth marks.

I knock my fist downwards onto my palm as I sounded out in realization.

「I remember now, I was eating something in my dream. Because you smelled so nice, I couldn't help biting down.」

「... I will kill you.」

「Uwah wait! I was wrong! It's my fault! I apologize, please spare my life...!」

「Shut up!」

And so, my second day in an another world began really loudly.

My actions were lowly, but fortunately, it didn't awaken any hidden cannibalistic tendencies within me.

Part 2

「... After you finish eating, we will set off immediately.」

Ai Fa said with an expression more unhappy than usual.

But it was natural for her to act like this, since I irked her. However, I wish she would let it go since she hit me with the handle of her knife five or six times already.

By the way, the breakfast she gave me was Kiba beast jerky.

This was another ordeal. Like dried squids snacks that goes with beer, it needed to be tore into thin strips before consumption. But it wouldn't dissolve no matter how much you chew it, just like rubber that taste like meat.

It also had the lingering taste of animal odour, probably because its blood wasn't drained properly.

Ai Fa leaned against the wall with a heavy aura that seemed to say 「don't come near me」. So I stood beside the stove as I chewed on Kiba beast jerky.

I looked at the iron pot that had been washed sparkling clean and thought about yesterday's dinner.

Dinner last night —— was horrendous.

To me, that was like some sort of torture.

No matter what, that meal is too much...

This might be the first time in my life that I said 「tastes nasty」 after eating someone's dish. I had fallen into the vicious cycle of self loath after having misspoke.

But the subject herself —— Ai Fa didn't seem to mind, and so I escaped unscathed.

「... There's no distinction of food being delicious or not.」

I heard this rude remark for the third time yesterday.

For the people of Forest's Edge, was dining just a way of obtaining nutrition?

That might be so...

That might be so, but that dish was too much.

First of all, the Kiba beast meat.

The Kiba beast meat was too tough.

And the animal stink was heavy.

Be it pork or beef, no matter how terrible the quality, they wouldn't stink so much.

Next, because the meat was cooked very thoroughly, it wasn't so tough to the extent of being unchewable. However, despite the surface of the meat being tender, the sinew was still inside, so it felt like half melted rubber... Simply put, the texture was terrible.

On the other hand, the fake onions had excellent texture.

I like how crisp it was.

But that was its only good point.

My only comment was, 「Onions aren't suitable for hot pot after all.」

And of course, onions were very suitable for things like beef intestines pot or Kimchi pot, but my family didn't have the habit of putting in onions when we cook hot pot.

And also, the fake potato was a huge problem.

What exactly was it?

It melted completely into the soup. After throwing it into the water, it turned into a powdery cream colored liquid that destroyed the balance of the entire dish.

The best way to describe it was 「flour that dissolves in water」.

Please imagine.

Thick stock with flour mixed into it.

Onions with crispy texture.

Lumps of soggy meat that stinked.

Flavored solely with black pepper.

Will that taste good?

Sorry to say, but I don't think it was nice at all.

And the most horrible thing for me was —— 「This dish smelled delicious」.

The fragrance was excellent, so the freshness of the meat and fats had definitely dissipated into the white murky liquid. Complemented by spice such as black pepper, I could wolf down several bowls of rice with this smell alone.

Even so, the dish tasted horrible.

When I scooped the meat slices and soup into my mouth, the animal stink made the fragrance disappear without a trace.

That was why —— it was so tormenting.

The central nervous system controlling my appetite was stimulated by the fragrance, but the thing invading my mouth was completely the opposite of that appetizing smell. To be honest, if not for my gratitude for the food and Ai Fa, I probably wouldn't be able to eat half a plate of it.

I ate three plates of that damn thing. Towards the end, I was battling my urge to puke.

And so, even though I ate til my stomach bulged, my brain had been nagging 「when can I eat?」 right until I fell asleep. That was probably the reason for my dream last night.

「... Why are you dazing off? It's time to go.」

I raised my head when I heard her sarcastic tone and found Ai Fa with her cape on and her blades on her waist, ready to go.

「Ah, wait for me! What about my Santoku knife?」

「...Santoku ...?」

「That knife. The one I handed over you last night.」

Ai Fa gestured towards the inside of the door with her chin in silence.

I remembered that she brought it to the door on the right, so I walked that way.

In the end, Ai Fa and I both slept in this big room, so I didn't have the chance to visit those three rooms.

I opened the door cautiously and slowly —— A strong smell assaulted me in an instant.

Uwah... this is unbearable.

As I expected, it was the food store.

There were many gunny sack-like bags that looked heavy, and I caught a glimpse of the onion and potato like vegetable inside.

Various plants were hung on the wall, one of it had withered and turned black like seaweed, another one was lustrous green with thin long leaves, hanging in the cramped space.

Further in, a space about 2 meter square was segregated by squarish boards, which were filled to about my knee level with black powder.

The smell came from there.

It was the black pepper like spice which were sprinkled onto the meat of the Kiba beast.

Leaving whether it was fragrant or not aside, it was too stimulating. There wasn't any windows, so the smell mixed with the air heavily. If I wasn't careful, this would probably hurt my eyes, nose and throat membrane.

I see, so that's how they preserve Kiba beast meat.

Despite the danger, my innate curiosity still prevailed, and I decided to observe further while blinking away tears.

The Kiba beast's meat was probably sealed inside this pile of spice. They use pepper instead of salt to cure their meat⁹. Since there wasn't any freezer, they had to use this method. The climate here was similar to early summer in Japan, so meat and other food stuff would rot quickly in the open.

Hmm... Is this dried leaf the ingredient?

The wilted leaf hanging on the wall looked like seaweed that had turned black. When I touched it, the leaves fell off in crumbs.

9 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curing_\(food_preservation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curing_(food_preservation))

I see. After it is dried, the leaves would become a spice like black pepper. If the Europeans during the age of sail saw this, they would probably faint from joy.

As I made my bold deduction, someone behind me suddenly said: 「What in the world are you doing?」

Ai Fa was standing at the entrance of the food storage room. The morning sun illuminated her from behind, and I could only see her silhouette.

She leaned against the wall with her arms crossed before her chest. Her head was tilted slightly and she had a questioning gaze.

「The knife is here. Hurry on out, the smell will leak away.」

「Ah, sorry. A lot of things in there piqued my curiosity.」

Ai Fa rushed me out of the room, and the morning sun outside was already very strong. I was only inside the room for tens of seconds, but I felt I was turning into peppered meat.

「Uwah, my nose hurts! The smell of that spice is too strong.」

「... Are you retarded? You can't eat that, and don't want to anyway, what's the point of staring at them?」

「Because it's interesting. I did tell you that I'm a son of a chef yesterday, right?」

「... There are only chefs inside Rock city. If you want to make a living with that, then learn the rules of this world faster and leave Forest's Edge.」

Ai Fa said unhappily and pushed the Santoku knife onto my chest.

「I don't know anything about this world, there's no way I can become a chef... But why did you put my kitchen knife in a room with such a strong smell?」

Although the blade won't rust or get damaged from the smell, I was worried that the scent would linger on it.

「... That is the only room without windows. Not everyone is as despicable as Diga Tsun who breaks through windows, but the food store is the safest place.」

「I see. You really cherished it... thank you.」

Ai Fa raised her brows.

She seemed unused to accepting other people's thanks.

「... We are wasting time. Before the sun rise to the middle of the sky, we will forage for Pico leaves and firewood. If you don't want to be called a freeloader, then contribute a little.」

「Understood!... But before we start work, I have a request, can you hear me out, Ai Fa? 」

Ai Fa showed an annoyed look.

Given how beautiful she was, this was a pity.

「Just how much trouble are you going to give me? Asuta, I didn't know you are such a shameless man.」

「No, I want to ease your load as much as possible... Starting from tonight, can you let me cook dinner? 」

Ai Fa's face was tensed, but her expression looked bewildered after hearing what I said.

She looked really cute like this.

「What do you mean? Cooking isn't a hassle, even a ten year old could do it. 」

「Erm... So this isn't really lessening your load huh... But I still want to try preparing the ingredients in this world with the cooking method from my world. 」

Ai Fa lowered her brows doubtfully as she appraised me.

That look in her eyes was like someone watching a dog walking on two legs.

Not everyone would like her current expression, but I think she looked really cute.

「I don't understand... Do all 『chefs』 feel the same way? 」

「I'm just an apprentice chef though. But all chefs would probably feel the same. 」

「... Do as you like. For me, cooking isn't that important. 」

Ai Fa walked towards the entrance after saying that.

I exhaled in relief and followed her slender figure.

My actions just now was as good as telling her directly: 「your cooking is terrible, let me do it」. I had already braced myself for her to swing her knife at me.

However, Ai Fa seemed to seriously think that the content of the meal was 「of no importance」. I felt conflicted, my emotions a mix of joy and sadness.

But this really sparks my will to challenge this.

I want to wipe away the dissatisfaction and melancholy I felt last night away.

I was sure that I could cook the Kiba beast meat and make it more delectable.

This ingredient gives off an amazing fragrance, but its horrible taste could be seen as the desecration of food.

I had not found a way to tackle the fake onions and fake potatoes, but I was certain that the potential of the Kiba beast had not been brought out yet.

As for the way to cook boar meat, I only knew the scratch of the surface. If I put them into action, just how much tastier could I improve the Kiba beast meat? Just thinking about this hyped me up and made me hungry.

On top of that...

I muttered as I peek at Ai Fa tying her shoes onto her feet.

I want her to taste the dishes I made.

As an apprentice chef, the only contribution I could make was to serve dishes that could somehow pass the mark.

Ai Fa seemed uninterested in eating, so all this might seem meaningless to her. But no matter who it was, everyone would feel happy when they taste delicious food.

This girl was always showing a displeased face, so if I could make her look a little happier, it would be considered a passing grade. Should I use this as the baseline?

I want to cook the Kiba beast's meat, and make my benefactor happy when she eat it.

It might be a little extreme to put it this way, but I had found my goal for my life now.

When I thought about that, the clouds in my heart seemed to clear a little.

「... Speaking of which, is your leg alright?」

Ai Fa asked me offhandedly after putting on her shoes.

「Yes, I can walk fine now... Thank you for your concern.」

「Who cares about you. If you tell me 『I can't walk anymore』 after we go into the forest, I will just leave you there.」

She spat her words out unhappily, and then added 「... so, if you feel anything wrong, don't hold it in and tell me right away.」

Repaying this benefactor was a worthwhile effort.

After I told her 「I got it」, we walked forth into this different world where the morning sun shone brightly.

Part 3

「... The Pico leaves grow along the water inside the forest. There is a river called Lanto in the woods, and its vicinity is the best place to forage for Pico leaves. The Tsun House's turf is upstream, so we will be heading downstream.」

「Yes captain.」

We walked along the path we took yesterday and headed into the forest.

We set off a bit late because of the various distractions, but the other houses in the settlement was still very quiet. I would see a person or two occasionally, but no one walked along this path.

「Hmmp. No one wants to enter the forest early in the morning. Everyone uses the time in the morning to settle miscellaneous tasks, such as tanning hide or chopping wood.」

「But captain, why are you heading into the forest so early in the morning?」

「... I usually won't go into the forest so early either. But I have another mouth to feed now, so I'm worried that my firewood supply wouldn't be enough.」

「So it's this lowly one's fault! Words fails to express the shame I have wrought!」

「... Speak normally or I will cut your tongue off.」

「Okay, I'm sorry.」

Ai Fa seemed displeased, so I decided to behave myself.

The scenery of this world appeared before me in the morning light for the very first time.

I couldn't see the surroundings clearly because of the dim lights yesterday. But the scenery here was really epic.

There was a light mist in the air around Mount Morga that raised up into the clouds. The mountain range extended to its left and right, leaving me in awe of its massiveness.

Our destination was the depths of the forest.

Aside from this area that had been cleared for the settlement, everywhere else was shrouded in lush greenery.

The air was clean and fresh without any hint of smog.

The birds soared in the sky.

Everywhere I looked was filled with the grandness of nature.

It wasn't too warm right now, so it felt comfortable to wear my long sleeved chef uniform.

I surveyed the scenery around me, and the morning dew on the trees glimmered under the bask of the morning sun.

If this was a camping trip I would be completely satisfied.

「I want to ask, what exactly are Pico leaves? 」

I asked when we reached the border of the forest. Ai Fa answered annoyingly that 「it's that thing you were so happy to see just now.」

「Eh? You mean that spice? That is a cute name.」

「... After about a month, the Pico leaves will lose their effectiveness. We need to gather enough of it before that happens. Without Pico leaves, the meat will spoil in less than two days. If you don't want to eat rotten meat, then work hard.」

「Understood... So the vegetables we ate last night also grows in the wild and can be foraged? 」

Ai Fa stepped into the dense forest as she shook the things hanging on her necklace.

「The tusk and horns of a Kiba beast is worth ten days worth of Aria and Poitan. Which means five days worth for two people... So we need to hunt one Kiba beast every five days, or our meals will be reduced to just the meat of the Kiba beast. Things are still fine for now.」

「Is that so? But with how huge this mountain is, you should be able to gather all kinds of ingredients here, right? 」

「... We can't take the resources of Mount Morga, that is a taboo.」

「Huh? 」

「If we harvest the resources of Mount Morga wilfully, the famished Kiba beast will attack the farmlands in Genos' territory. Kiba beast don't eat herbs like Pico leaves and Lilo, and the Grikee fruit that has potent poison. That's why they only permit the people of Forest's Edge to harvest these plants.」

「On whose orders? The mountains and forests shouldn't belong to anyone, correct? 」

「Both Mount Morga and the forest are under the dominion of Selva, the Kingdom of the West. Eighty years ago, we the people of Forest Edge fled from the war in Southern Kingdom Jagaru to this forest... And we made a pledge with the Kingdom of the West not to wilfully harvest the resource in the mountain, and to only hunt Kiba beast. We were only granted permission to stay under these terms.」

「This is an outrage. The mountain and forest are enormous, the Kiba beast won't starve just from harvesting some of the resource.」

「That's not true. Kiba beast are creatures that only lives at the foot of the mountain. Deep in the mountain lurks the giant Madarama snakes and Valb wolves which even the Kiba beasts feared. Ferocious barbarian also lives there. We people of Forest's Edge and the Kiba beasts can only live in the relatively safety at the foot of the mountain.」

「I see...」

I could understand the rationale, but I couldn't agree with it.

Kiba beast could only live at the foot of the mountain because of the fight for survival. But in order to protect other people's farmland, the people of Forest's Edge could only hunt Kiba beast... This arrangement felt really forced.

Ai Fa told me yesterday that those people mocked them as 《Kiba eaters》, which irked me a lot.

「... The people of Forest's Edge are refugees from the Southern Kingdom after all. We turned our back on the God of the South Jackal, and offer our sword and souls to the God of the West Selva. But even so, for the citizens of Rock City, we aren't their people, but outsiders.」

Ai Fa seemed to realize how I felt and muttered emotionlessly.

「Even for outsiders, your people have lived on this land for eight decades right? It isn't too much to fight harder for your own rights.」

「... Just like how I refuse to seek the protection from the Tsun House, the people of Forest's Edge don't ask for aid from the Kingdom. Instead of tending farmlands, our characters are more suited for hunting Kiba beast.」

「I see, but to the people of Forest's Edge, I'm a complete 『outsider』, so I don't have any say in this problem.」

What I said seemed to have angered Ai Fa and she glared at me fiercely.

「No, I'm not refuting your way of life. But I think I definitely can't get along with the citizens of Rock city.」

「... Hmmp. A weak man like you is more suited for Rock city, not Forest's Edge.」

Hearing Ai Fa's sarcastic words, I glared back. I suddenly thought about something.

「Wait, you said that the horns and tusks on one Kiba beast can be exchanged for ten days worth of food? So for a family of ten, they would need to hunt one Kiba beast — Hey hey hey, there're five hundred people here, so that would mean 50 Kiba beasts everyday?」

Ai Fa tilted her head as if she was asking 「So what?」

Hey, this was the biggest issue.

「In this 80 years, the people of Forest's Edge had been hunting 50 Kiba beasts every day? If you hunt them at such a rate, won't the Kiba beast go extinct?」

「It's impossible for the Kiba beasts to go extinct. In recent years, their numbers had been growing instead, and they had destroyed even more farmland. The Kiba beasts numbers aren't so thin that we can wipe them out. This is a vast forest after all.」

「I see... That's incredible.」

In that case, I believe even more firmly that the Western Kingdom had imposed a great responsibility on the people of Forest's Edge with a cunning excuse. And the system meant the people of Forest's Edge could only hunt Kiba beasts and not any other food, which reeks of malicious intent to me.

The people of Forest's Edge couldn't collect the natural resources of the forest or go into agriculture, and could only hunt Kiba beasts — The other party probably gave such an order.

If that was the truth, then it would be even more maddening for them to mock the people of Forest's Edge as 《Kiba eaters》 behind their back.

「... And so, it is prohibited for anyone to take from the forest. Anyone who break this taboo would get their head scalped¹⁰. Remember this well.」

「... Okay.」

After I said that, Ai Fa stopped and grabbed me by my chest.

「Hey, your attitude towards me is terrible. If you have any complaints, say it out clearly.」

「I'm not angry at you! I'm just unhappy about how the people in the Kingdom and that city handles things.」

Ai Fa's eyes were like a boiling pot of Kiba beast meat, but she cooled down after hearing what I said.

「What do you mean? You are not a part of Forest's Edge, why are you angry about this?」

「Do you even need to ask? Just thinking about their actions objectively would make my blood boil. And I'm in your care, so I will naturally think about things from your perspective.」

「... You really are a weirdo.」

Ai Fa unhand me and strode forth again, the grass rustling under her foot steps.

「And what you said is illogical. They didn't threaten us with force when we made these terms. I don't like the people in the city, but we take pride and honor in keeping them safe. If we leave, then other people would need to leave their jobs to fight the Kiba beast... We have already offered

¹⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scalping>

our swords to the Western God Selva, when we hunt the Kiba beast, we are also contributing to the prosperity of the Kingdom.」

「Erm... I'm not born in Forest's Edge, so I don't really understand this feeling.」

「We live proudly in Forest's Edge. Not only are these tusks and horns our wealth that can be used to secure food, it also represent honor. The shameless act of stripping the forest of its resources will endanger the entire Kingdom, and is also as good as trampling on the pride of the people of Forest's Edge. Remember that.」

「I understand. The situation in the Kingdom has nothing to do with me, but in order to protect the honor of the people of Forest's Edge, I'm willing to abide by this rule.」

Actually, I was a bit unwilling, but I could only accept it right now.

Ai Fa pulled away the branches and quickened her pace. She then turned her gaze towards me.

「.....Asuta, you are a strange fellow.」

The strange thing was, Ai Fa's unhappy expression since this morning vanished without a trace when she said that.

We walked for dozens of minutes more, and when the sun was completely up, we reached our first destination.

This was Lanto river, where the Pico leaves grow.

The river was about five metres wide. The flow was gentle since it was downstream, but it was quite deep. Sunlight shone through the branches and leaves, making the scene look majestic.

However, the banks around the river were rocky without any grass.

I didn't know if I should continue forward and look back at Ai Fa. She was actually taking off the cape on her shoulders.

「... Before I look for the Pico leaves, I want to bathe.」

「What? Bath?」

「Is there a problem? My body is covered with the fats of the Kiba beast, and it feels uncomfortable after I sweat.」

Even though Ai Fa had regained her composure, her personality was cold as usual. She spoke to me in a crude tone, then handed the cape she took off to me.

Oh, it wasn't light at all. On closer inspection, the insides of the cape had several small pockets filled with unknown fruits, needles and a bundle of rope. The entire weight was between two to three kilograms.

「... I will leave this in your care too.」

Ai Fa even took off her necklace of tusks and horns and handed it to me.

But dear princess, your servant's hands were already occupied by your cape.

「Lower your head.」

Ai Fa kicked my leg.

「Don't need to kick me, I will do so if you ask.」

I said and bent my waist slightly. Ai Fa took off her necklace with both hands and walked before me.

Ah, she was very close. Aside from that matter this morning that I couldn't remember, this was probably the first time we were so close... As I was thinking about such pointless things, my gaze fell onto her neck naturally.

On the left of her slender neck was clear bruises in the shape of a bite mark.

I actually did something so horrible to her body.

By the way, Her Highness had a nice scent after all. And her face was so close to mine, her skin was really smooth. Her pink lips were so sexy... Was this a new type of punishment game?

Ai Fa didn't notice my foolish thoughts and pulled away after hanging the necklace around my neck.

「Alright... The Kiba beasts are still sleeping at this time, but there might be deviants that wander around early in the morning. If you sense any Kiba beast in the forest, alert me immediately.」

「Got it. I just need to watch the forest.」

Even though I was acting casually, Ai Fa stilled looked at me with an icy stare.

「... Just to be safe, let me tell you one thing. You must not look at the naked body of an unwed woman, that's a taboo.」

「Huh? So it's fine if the woman is married?」

「... Only a husband may see the bare body of his wife.」

Ara, I should have kept my mouth shut. I felt Ai Fa's eyes had turned icier.

「... Go and keep an eye on the forest.」

「... Got it.」

I looked for the largest boulder there was, and leaned on it to surveil the forest.

But she just told me that necklace was an important source of wealth and pride to the people of Forest Edge, yet she entrusted it to me so readily. She also trusted me to not peek at her, so I should feel honored.

However, I don't really understand the actions of this girl Ai Fa.

I thought she would be incredibly guarded, but she trusted someone like me so easily. Whenever I felt impressed by her care and compassion, she would ignore me coldly.

I think her nature was kind and gentle, but her personality was also eccentric with big mood swings.

But no matter what, she is reliable.

Just when I was thinking that...

「Yaahh!」 Ai Fa's panicked scream broke the serenity.

Part 4

「Hey! Ai Fa, what's wrong!?!」

I got up on one knee and shouted from behind the boulder.

I can't act rashly, maybe she just slipped. If I check on her just for that, I will be dead meat.

But Ai Fa didn't respond.

I heard the sound of water splashing violently reverberating in the air.

「Hey! I'm coming to check on you! If you're fine, answer me within three seconds!」

I was worried that she didn't understand the concept of 「second」, so I kept shouting.

But she didn't respond.

I endured the anxiety that made my heart hurt and counted to three.

「One... Two... Three!」

I stood up and looked towards the river.

There — wasn't anyone there.

But on the bank some distance away from the river, I saw the familiar clothing and one large and small blade. And water was being splashed violently in the water over there.

I put down the cape and jumped over the boulder I was leaning against earlier and charged in.

At the same time, Ai Fa's face appeared on the surface of the water.

Her expression was twisted from pain.

「Ai Fa!」

Ai Fa was gasping desperately for oxygen, but water flowed into her mouth mercilessly.

The river was about waist level, but Ai Fa couldn't push herself to the surface.

「What're you doing! Grab onto me!」

I stood at the river bank and extended my right hand.

Ai Fa struggled fiercely as she looked at me with weak eyes.

「Don't... Come...」

Her voice was weak and hoarse.

She was drifting slowly downstream.

「Stop kidding with me! Hey! Grab my hand!」

Since it has come to this, I have no other choice.

I stepped into the water with my right feet. Steadying myself to not get washed away, I reached out to grab Ai Fa.

The moment my fingers was about to touch Ai Fa——

Something coiled up my right arm.

「Uwah!?!」

At the same time, I felt a stabbing pain in my right arm, and I could clearly hear my bones creaking.

Something was grabbing onto my right arm and holding it with amazing strength.

It was about as thick as my arm and covered with dark bluish scales. This strange object was — the tail of a humongous snake.

When I realized its true identity, Ai Fa groaned painfully.

「Ugghh—」

The splashes became more violent and Ai Fa's arms came out from the water.

Her fingers were clasped around the snake's neck.

The head of the snake was twisted in the shape of a scythe and about the size of a rugby ball. It was snarling its teeth at Ai Fa.

So Ai Fa was wrestling with this giant python in the water.

「Damn it...!」

I endured the pain in my right arm and steadied my footing even further.

The ankle I twisted yesterday was still stinging, but it wasn't the time to mind it right now.

Even though its monstrous strength could probably crack my bones, it worked just fine for it to grab onto me, which allowed me to drag it out of the water.

The river flow was gentle, and I could guess Ai Fa's weight, it can be done — No, I had to drag it out even if it cost me my life.

「Ughh...!」



Using every ounce of strength in my body, I dragged that snake together with Ai Fa onto the river bank.

My right leg was out of the river. Ai Fa's hands was still on the neck of the snake, and I reached my left arm over.

Next would be my skills in lifting weights.

Although I didn't have any experience in weightlifting.

「... Hah!」

Using all the strength I had, I finally dragged Ai Fa's body onto the shore.

「Ughhh...」

Ai Fa moaned weakly.

The snake had coiled several loops around Ai Fa's naked body.

It was around Ai Fa's breast, waist and right leg, the rest of its body was over her shoulder and on my right arm.

The thickest part of the snake was about the size of my thighs, its girth and length were both extraordinary.

On closer look, the dark bluish scales of the snake was covered in cracks and wounds. If not for its injuries, the snake would have already crushed Ai Fa.

「Alright! Ai Fa, don't let go!」

I grabbed a rock nearby and smashed at its head.

The snake's body covered in shiny scales started spasming.

「Snakes can't feel pain」 was just a myth, it will feel pain if you hit it hard enough.

Ai Fa held the head of the snake still in the air, and I repeatedly bashed it with my rock.

After about five hits, red blood spilled out. At the same time, Ai Fa howled in pain.

The snake was also squeezing my right arm.

「Damn it! Don't constrict! Release her!」

Even though Ai Fa was steadying the snake's head, it was held in the air and hard to strike with full force.

In that case, I switched target to its stomach!

I aimed for the part where the snake touched the ground and bashed with all my might.

I could feel the sensation of meat being crushed under my rock.

「.....!」

The snake finally relaxed its hold.

I immediately grabbed Ai Fa's body, and kicked the fleeing snake into the river.

The snake sunk into the river with a heavy thump.

After making sure it had swam downstream, I called out to Ai Fa.

「Hey! Stay with me! Are you okay! Please don't die on me, Ai Fa!」

I laid Ai Fa down on a rocky platform and shook her bare shoulders hard.

Ai Fa moaned weakly, then vomited a lot of water.

The blonde hair she usually tied up in a bun was now sticking to her wet face and breasts.

Ai Fa was very frail right now, unlike her usual self. Both her eyes were shut and her nails bit into the back of my hand.

「You don't feel well? Still need to throw up the water in your system?」

I rolled the weak Ai Fa to her side and patted her back firmly. She threw up even more water.

「Ugh... A... Suta...?」

「Are you alright? I threw that motherfucking snake off this motherfucking plains! It's fine now!」

Her blue eyes still didn't focus as she looked my way dully.

She looked very frail.

But she was still alive.

I propped Ai Fa's upper body up, and hugged her slender body tight with both arms.

Thinking about it after the fact, Ai Fa had just broken out of the snake's bounds, how could I do this to her so soon? Even though I reflected on it now, I was too caught up in the moment back then.

「Great... Don't make me worry so much...」

I was drenched immediately, but I didn't care.

But —— Ai Fa pushed my chest away with an unexpectedly powerful brute strength.

「Unhand me... let go!」

「Ehh?」

I was shocked and loosened my hold.

At the same time, Ai Fa bumped my chest hard and I fell onto my butt.

「W-What's the matter?」

There seemed to be a fire burning in Ai Fa's eyes.

She grabbed the hilt of her sabre that was by her feet.

「W-What is it? What happened?」

Her drastic change scared me out of my mind. Ai Fa drew out her sabre before me.

Her face looked as weak as a sick child just a moment ago, but it was filled with killing intent now.

Did I strike a nerve with Ai Fa?

Was it because I saw her in the nude? But that was an accident.

Or was it because I hugged her unconsciously?

But... If this is so serious that she needed to kill me, I can't do anything about it.

Too many things were happening and my mind couldn't keep up.

But instead of watching Ai Fa die, I would rather die by her blade. Such a silly thought filled my mind.

The naked Ai Fa was down on one knee, her sabre pointed at my throat.

She was using the back of the blade instead of the sharpened edge. But with how thick the blade was, even the blunt edge of the blade would be enough to kill me.

I stared into Ai Fa's eyes.

But — Ai Fa wasn't looking at me.

Blue flames seemed to be burning in her eyes. She wasn't looking at me, but the space behind me.

Gurururu... Noise that sounded like the low hum of an exhaust pipe came from an unexpectedly close distance.

There was something — behind me.

「Hah!」

A ferocious yell came from her mouth.

The sabre left a silver trail in the air.

And then, something pressed onto my body.

「... Ugghh.」

Something heavy fell from the sky suddenly.

It was hard and rough, and emitted a thick animal scent.

Ai Fa collapsed onto the ground with a sigh.

Her blue pupils glared at me as usual through her head of messy blonde hair.

「You can't let your guard down even after making through one crisis. If not, you can't survive in Forest's Edge.」

She was still naked, but her tone was haughty.

But I finally understood what happened.

That heavy thing on my head and back was the huge body of a Kiba beast. It was in its dying spasms right now because Ai Fa smashed its skull in with her sabre.

Chapter 3 - Apprentice chef in a different world

Part 1

「... Maybe you're the incarnation of disaster.」

After she tied her hair, dressed herself and put on her cape with a smooth move, she made that comment.

「I'm honored by your words, but what makes you say that my lady? 」

「Giant Madarama snakes won't appear at the foot of the mountain normally, but one got washed to this place by the river. The sun have not yet reached above our heads, and a Kiba beast was already roaming in the woods and even attacked us. What a series of ill fortune.」

Oh I see.

By the way, there were more than two ill fortune. You had yet to marry, but I saw your naked body. I wanted to retort that, but I didn't want to die, so I held my peace.

My judgement seemed to be on point.

Because when Ai Fa saw me fell silent, her expression changed, as if she regretted what she said.

「... It was unexpected, but I was still careless to not notice that Madarama. And you did save me — I want to thank you for that.」

Ai Fa lowered her head a little, but her eyes were looking up at me as she fidgeted with the necklace on her chest. She said in a soft voice that was barely audible to humans and said: 「... Thank you.」

Her actions were just like that of a child.

My heart raced for some reason and I replied stiffly:

「It's fine, don't worry about it. I should be the one saying that, I didn't notice the Kiba beast that was so close to me. You saved me... Thank you.」

As long as Ai Fa got her spirits back, nothing else matters.

If that snake killed Ai Fa... I feel like dying just thinking about that.

「No matter what, this is still a Kiba beast. Let's deal with it while it is fresh.」

The head of the Kiba beast was smashed by Ai Fa, and it was still lying by my feet while spasming.

Compared to the Kiba beast I ran into yesterday, this one was smaller. But it was still about 150 cm long and 70 kg heavy. It had huge horns and tusks, but Ai Fa defeated it in just one blow.

「That's true, let's cut off it's leg first.」 Ai Fa raised her blade, but I stopped her in a hurry.

「Wait wait, before dismembering it, we need to bleed it out first. Don't just cut it up so suddenly.」

「Bleed it out... What do you mean?」

「What!? You have never bleed¹¹ them out before? No wonder their meat stinks so much!」

Ai Fa had a face of complete bewilderment when she heard my yell.

Yup, I love her bewildered look the most. For the people of Forest's Edge, this was a huge problem.

「Let me tell you then. The reason why meat stinks, is because of the blood. By bleeding them out, the Kiba beast's meat will not be so pungent.」

「... I don't understand what you're saying. Wouldn't the blood flow out during dismemberment?」

「You can't get it all out that way... Now isn't the time to discuss this leisurely. It will be too late if the Kiba beast's heart stop pumping. Hey, I will explain later, lend me your knife.」

Ai Fa handed me her knife with a face full of doubt. The Kiba beast was down on the ground on its side. I bent down behind it.

Well then — Despite acting all professional, I had only seen the members of the hunter hobbyist group perform exsanguination before. And I wasn't sure if the internal makeup of the Kiba beast was similar to a boar, everything was dependent on luck.

The position of a boar's artery and organs are similar to that of a human.

Recalling the words the hunter said, I leaned onto the huge body of the Kiba beast.

I aimed the blade at the point where the Kiba beast's thick neck connected with its chest.

And stabbed in one go.

Blood — Only a few drops came out.

It failed.

Well, things usually won't be so smooth.

With no other choice, I slid the knife slowly down its chest.

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exsanguination>

I just need to cut the carotid artery or the aorta.

As I struggled against the Kiba beast's tough hide and inched my blade forward — fresh blood finally flowed out.

I pulled out the knife in a hurry, and more darkish red fluid gushed out.

If I didn't wound the heart directly, then it probably... worked.

「The heart is an organ that will circulate blood around the entire body. By cutting a large artery and not hurting the heart, we can bleed the beast out efficiently.」

Hence, it would be better to slit the carotid artery, but it was risky. If I hurt the throat or breathing organs, the Kiba beast would suffocate to death, and its heart would stop pumping.

「It is actually better to hang it from a tree, but lifting this fellow would be a lot of work. This should be enough!」

As she didn't reply, I turned my head back and found Ai Fa with a confused expression.

「... We're just bringing the meat on its legs back, why do we need to bleed out its entire body?」

「Hmm?」

「If we bring back a Kiba beast of this size, the meat would spoil before we can even finish. Large families would bring an entire Kiba beast back in order to skin its hide, but everyone else will usually just take the legs.」

「Leaving such a delicacy is such a waste!」

「If we leave the rest of the carcass here, the Manto that only eat rotting meat and other beasts would finish it. If we bring it home and it rots before we can finish it, that will be a graver sin.」

「I see, then there's no problem. But why bring back the leg meat? Thigh meat aren't bad, but there are many other parts that are more delectable.」

「That's not true. Kiba meat is very pungent, and its hind leg doesn't taste as strong.」

I understand now. If they didn't know about bloodletting, then the torso would indeed be more pungent than the limbs. After all, its veins would be cut when they take the legs, and a lot of blood would flow out.

Even so, after spending eighty years hunting Kiba beasts for a living, they must be really crude to not even consider draining the Kiba's blood. Since the meat taste bad, they should spend more effort to make it more delectable. Such greed and ambition was the reason why the food culture of humans could develop so rapidly.

As I was thinking about all that, the blood stop flowing.

The Kiba beast that was spasming had completely stopped.

It was dead.

I offered it a prayer in my heart.

The fur of the Kiba beast was covered in mud, grass and its own feces. After I cleaned it with water from the river, I turned to Ai Fa:

「Okay, time for the next step... Erm, can I insist on my own view and bring it back whole? 」

「Do what you want, just don't damage the Horns and Tusks.」

Ai Fa showed a complicated expression, not sure if she should be excited or not care at all, and just shrugged.

I ignored her reaction and stabbed the knife into the Kiba beast's belly.

This knife was sharper than the one I used during the farm experience camp. Careful not to cut too deep, I carved open the Kiba's stomach.

In order to extract its organs.

This wasn't hard, but there was one point to take note of. That was to not cut the large intestines, gall and bladder which had a horrible stench. If the stench from these organs got onto the meat, it would render the blood letting meaningless.

I cut into the diaphragm with my blade and started taking out the organs.

First were the small and large intestines.

Next were the guts, liver, pancreas, lungs and heart.

I extracted them one at a time easily.

The Kiba beast's body structure was not much different from a boar.

After emptying its upper torso cavity, the hardest part awaited me in the lower cavity. Its bladder.

I moved my knife cautiously, careful not to break that organ.

... Hmm?

There was an organ I had never seen before beneath the bladder.

Was it an organ unique to the Kiba beast?

I carefully cut off that organ.

The oval organs were huge, with one on either side and felt really solid.

... Ah.

These were probably its testicle.

The one I dismembered before was female, so it didn't have such an organ.

I placed the testicles on a boulder to show my respect.

And the extraction of the organs came to an end.

I turned back and Ai Fa still had a look of surprise.

「This looks just like the ritual performed by the rumored voodoo priests. Is this process necessary for the sake of eating meat?」

「It is. But I can't perform the next step here. We need to find a way to bring it back like this... how can we do this?」

Ai Fa sighed, and disappeared into the woods after saying 「wait right here.」

While she was gone, I used the river water to wash the Kiba beast's empty cavity.

Fortunately, there wasn't creatures like leeches here. The Kiba beast's body temperature was falling, so if they were here, they would probably jumped onto me since my temperature was higher.

「Here, use this.」

After about five minutes later, Ai Fa came back. In her hands were a long wooden stick that was about my height.

The stick had a deep color, looked really straight and there were signs of branches being cut from its surface everywhere. It was about the thickness of my wrist.

「This is Krilee tree. It's hard and won't break easily.」

「Alright. How do we use it to carry the Kiba?」

Ai Fa bent forward quietly and took out the ropes from the inside of her cape. She then tied the limbs of the Kiba beast onto the Krilee tree.

「I see now! Your movements are really practiced.」

「I'm just imitating others. The men from large clans would use this method to bring home an entire Kiba beast to skin their hide.」

「Okay. Aifa, don't you need to tan hides too? The cape on you is made from the Kiba beast's hide too, right?」

「Tanning hides requires effort from a lot of people, and that's women's work.」

「You're a woman too.」 I didn't say it out loud, but I was probably showing it on my face, so Ai Fa stiffened her face as if I was annoying.

「I can buy tanned hides with the Kiba's tusks. So, instead of wasting time tanning the hides, it is wiser to hunt Kiba beasts. In the first place, I will starve if I don't hunt Kiba beasts... Also, there's no one at home to tan the hide with me. You got any problems with that?」

「I have no problems of course. I'm just thinking... You said that tanning hides is the task of women, and hunting Kiba beast is the job of men?」

「Of course. Women won't hunt Kiba beast.」

「B-But you're a woman.」

In the end, I still slipped my tongue.

Ai Fa looked away unhappily and started tying the Kiba's forelegs.

「I might be a woman, but I'm also the head of the Fa House. My father taught me how to make a living by hunting Kiba beasts, so I could support myself.」

「I see.」

But what kind of emotions did Ai Fa's late father harbour when he taught his daughter the skills to 《hunt Kiba》?

That night when Ai Fa's father passed away, she offended Diga Tsun, who had authority in the settlement, and was ostracized the next day.

And so, Ai Fa lived by herself without relying on anyone. Thanks to the skills to hunt Kiba imparted to her by her father, she didn't fall into despair! Did her father foresee his daughter being ostracized after his death? That was unlikely.

Don't... Don't need to think too much about this.

I was the same, my old man taught me how to cook since I was young. He even encouraged me to find something more interesting than cooking. Every parent would want their children to learn more skills.

But she...

Unlike me, she probably didn't have a choice.

She could only make a living by hunting Kiba beasts like a man.

Even though she was such a beautiful and gentle girl—

「... Hey you, why are you looking at me with weird eyes.」

Ai Fa said as she stood up slowly.

A fire was burning in her cat-like eyes, and her brown cheeks were blushing a little.

「Listen up, you committed a grave taboo. You can't complain even if I gouge out your eyes. I'm only not pursuing the matter on the account of you saving me from my desperate situation. Don't get the wrong idea, or you will suffer one day.」

「What?」

I tilted my head and denied frantically.

「I-I'm not thinking about your naked body! Just who do you think I am? I had already buried this in the deepest part of my mind, but you are making me remember again!」

「Shut up! You want me to cut off your tongue before I gouge out your eyes?」

「Sigh, just let it go, it's retarded! We are all set, right? Let's bring it with us!」

To flee from the fuming Ai Fa, I bend my waist in front of the Kiba.

The pile of organs entered my field of vision.

「I would like to cook these, but we don't have a refrigerator. And with my skills right now, I couldn't handle these organs.」

「... Are you serious?」

「Of course, aside from it's grunts, every part of the Kiba beast can be eaten¹².」

This proverb should be talking about pigs, not boars. But no biggie.

After putting the front of the stick onto my shoulders, I could feel an astonishing weight.

As expected of something on the level of 70 kg,

「If you complain about being tired mid way, I will leave you behind.」

Ai Fa picked up the rear end of the stick deftly, and the weight on my shoulders lightened slightly.

「I will work hard for the sake of a delicious meal. What about you, is your body fine after going through that unfortunate incident?」

¹² Proverb from Okinawa.

「Shut up! Don't bring that up again!」

Hmm, did that incident scarred Ai Fa more than I expected?

Even though her skills in 《hunting Kiba》 could rival a man, she was still a girl going through puberty. Leaving the taboo aside, she would naturally feel embarrassed.

Leaving that aside for now, I would need to do the preparations for a delicious dinner soon.

「Let's go! I will cook something delicious to reward you for the hardship you suffered today, look forward to it!」

Part 2

A few hours later, inside Ai Fa's place.

「Alright! Let's get started!」

I stood before the large body of the Kiba beast and yelled. Ai Fa sat cross legged and leaned against the wall, muttering 「whatever」 unhappily.

She probably wasn't unhappy and was just tired. Actually, I felt exhausted too.

First, carrying that Kiba beast back home from the river was already a demanding task. After that, we had to complete our original job — collecting pico leaves and firewood, and returned to the river bank.

No further mishaps happened after that, but it was almost noon when we finished.

Which means to say we had been working diligently from morning to noon, aside from that deadly duel with the giant Madarama snake episode in the middle.

Our schedule for noon was supposed to be hunting Kiba beast, and there wasn't any other pressing tasks at hand. Hence, I could start dealing with the Kiba beast we encountered in the morning.

Ai Fa started the fire in the stove as I requested. After finishing her task, she sat down heavily and munched on some jerky, her expression saying very clearly that 「what happens next is none of my business」.

After peeking at Ai Fa, I raised the knife she loan me.

As bloodletting was done and the organs were extracted, the next step would of course be 「skinning」.

There was a broken door in the store room, so I used it as my working platform. As there wasn't any furniture that looked like a table in the house, I had no choice but to sit on the floor and proceed. I turned the belly side of the Kiba to face up, and placed the wood I prepared beforehand on either side to steady its posture.

I started with its hind leg first.

Using the knife, I went one circle around the ankles of its trotters, and cut from the inside of its leg up to its stomach.

Next, I slice the skin off its meat, removing its hide.

Hmm, it had plenty of fats.

The fats between the meat and the skin was about 1.5 cm thick.

Appraising it as an ingredient, the condition was excellent, but it also made the job more difficult. For animals with less fats such as deer, skinning could be done faster.

But this was for the sake of enjoying a delicious meal. I turned my knife and stripped away the hide quickly. I tried my best to not cut into the skin and not remove the fats.

The meat on both hind legs were finally unveiled.

The thigh meat covered by snow white fats bulged out under the stripped hide. This was an interesting sight.

At this time, the blade of the knife turned rather dull.



It was covered with sticky fats.

I dipped the blade into the boiling water inside the iron pot to dissolve the fats.

This was the reason why skinning couldn't be done in the wild.

The house was filled with the thick scent of blood and meat.

After wiping the knife with the cloth Ai Fa gave me, I continued with my work.

Using the same method, I skinned the fore legs.

It might sound easy, but it actually took me an hour.

But this was just the beginning. After finishing the limbs, it was time to deal with the torso.

Since I already gutted the Kiba beast, I started working from the cut I already made.

Similar to how I skinned the limbs, I slit the blade between hide and meat, then peel away the hide as I cut.

However, the surface area of the torso was much bigger than the limbs. The fats made the handle slippery, so my hold was less firm than before, making it harder to strip away the hide.

In that case, I had to make holes at the edge of the hide for my fingers to grip onto.

Because the hide was very thick, it wouldn't tear easily even if I pull at it with all my might.

I repeatedly clean off the fats on the blade as I peel away the hide.

When the right half of the Kiba beast was finally stripped clean, I was already covered in sweat.

My body told me that about two and a half hours had passed. The light shining in through the window was still bright.

「Phew. Time for a break.」

I placed the knife beside the head of the Kiba and sat down on the rug exhausted.

I looked back at the family head — Ai Fa, who was showing a shocked expression as expected.

Her eyes were wide open which looked really child-like. It felt healing just looking at her.

Because she always had a fierce expression, the difference felt really wonderful.

「...Asuta, your hands sure are nimble.」

「Yes, but only when I'm cooking.」

「And you are really serious in your work.」

「Yes, but only when I'm cooking.」

「... There's no need for such troublesome procedures. Kiba meat can be eaten after cooking it. Why are you putting in so much effort for such unnecessary work?」

Her words didn't upset me, I wasn't that narrow minded.

And so, I replied to her in a mature manner: 「I just like to eat delicious food, and cooking them for others to eat.」

I would ask her to judge if this was an exercise in futility after she had tasted my dishes.

「Alright, time to continue.」

I thought of something while I was resting.

Before skinning the left half of the torso, I needed to do one more thing.

To cut off the Kiba's head.

It had many organs on its head, such as the eyes, mouth and nose.

Hence, it was hard to skin.

So I had to chop off its head, it would be easier to deal with the head separately from the body.

And so, I started the preparations to cut off its neck.

This Kiba's skull was smashed in, dying in a horrible way. After thinking in my heart 「I will make you delicious」, I stabbed the knife into its jaw.

The Kiba beast's carcass was stiffening gradually, compared to the time I bled it out, it felt much harder.

And when I cut it open, a large amount of blood gushed out.

This couldn't be helped. Even though I drained its blood earlier, that didn't mean all the blood was gone. Furthermore, I didn't have any experience before this. I was just an apprentice chef who was working haphazardly from my memory three years ago.

A seventeen years old apprentice chef who tried dismembering a boar just one time. The only tool I had was just a hunting knife, no work station and I had to prone on the ground and work hard in cutting off the Kiba's neck.

Not just Ai Fa, anyone who saw me like this would probably laugh.

But I was happy.

Despite being covered in sweat and animal blood, I could feel that I was alive.

If they heard what I just thought, some people might think I have some sort of fetish. But the fact was, I hate lunatics who dismember animals just for the fun of it, and not for the sake of eating them.

I like cooking.

I had grown up watching the back of my father. When I entered primary school, I was already helping out in the restaurant. Maybe I didn't choose this path out of my own conviction, and maybe I was just walking on a path someone else paved for me. But even so, I have no complaints.

And then, my dad's catch phrase was 「go find something more interesting than cooking」.

「If you can't find any, then it can't be helped. You will have to take over the family business.」 My old man would say with a smile. He made me attend high school because he was worried about this.

However, I spent all my time in the kitchen.

Cooking was so interesting, so why would I need to go out of my way to find another hobby? I couldn't understand the need for that.

I spent all my days cooking dishes that would impress my dad.

I really love cooking.

「Phew, this is tiring.」

When I cut the Kiba beast's neck halfway, I poured out a lot water from the water flask to drink.

As I was drenched in sweat, even lukewarm water tasted great.

Time to continue.

The back of the knife was jagged, probably used to cut the Kiba's tusks and horns. I used it to cut its collar bone.

And so, I cut off the rest of the parts and that head fell onto the broken door.

After a groan, I only skinned the parts I needed, and took the meat around and neck and cheeks.

Other parts could be eaten too, and the tongue was also enticing, but I could only cook these ingredients. If I knew, I would have asked the hunters to explain more thoroughly.

Next, I skinned the left half of the torso, flipped the Kiba over and peeled off the hide on its back.

The skinning was finally complete.

There were holes all over the place, but the I managed to peel off the entire hide beneath the neck.

Because this Kiba was 150 cm long and about 70 kg, spreading out the entire hide looked impressive.

The body of the Kiba beast was covered in fats, and looked like a huge lump of white meat.

A lump of white meat that was missing the head.

It was impossible to tell what animal it was like this.

This was also an impressive sight.

But I didn't have time to indulge myself in this. It was finally time for the final steps.

After the skinning was done, the last task would be 「dismembering」.

I laid the bare body of the Kiba beast on its back once again, and stabbed into the inside of the hip joint.

I cut into the joint between the hip and the hind leg. After reaching a certain point, I twisted the joint in the opposite direction. With a dull crack, the joints between the pelvic bone and femur became visible.

The unveiled bare bones looked white and beautiful.

I sliced off the rest of the muscles and tendons, then pulled in the other direction, and the meat started coming off.

The right hind leg was cut off after I ran the blade across the joint.

It was a huge piece of thigh meat, about 10 kg heavy.

After the right hind leg, I worked on the left hind leg.

After the left foreleg, I worked on the right foreleg.

The forelegs weren't connected to a complicated joint like the pelvic bone, and could be removed after cutting through the ligaments.

It was time for the final climax.

I didn't know how much time had passed, but the sun was turning a shade of orange.

It had been four to five hours since I started this project.

「... Oh right. Ai Fa, where is the saw?」

It had been a while since I looked at Ai Fa. When I turned towards her, it was a pity that she didn't show a confused expression.

Or rather, the moment I turned back, she was looking back blankly, and didn't show her usual face.

「Were you sleeping? Sorry for waking you up.」

「I'm not sleeping! Who will sleep when the sky is still so bright!」

If that was so, why was she so angry? Ai Fa stood up with a pout, and disappeared behind a door.

She went into the room in the middle. That should be the place where the utensils and kitchen wares were stored.

When Ai Fa walked out from the room, she was holding a saw with a blade about 30 cm long. If this saw was kept inside a sheath, it would look just like a sword. I could only tell it was a saw if it was drawn out.

The saw was about 5 cm thick and 5mm wide. I had never seen such a thick saw before. But it should be fine, since the people of Forest's Edge used it to build their stylish houses.

「After I finish this, the job will be done for today. Wait for me a while more.」

I told Ai Fa that after receiving the saw from her. She turned her head away with a hmmp, and didn't answer me.

I really don't get women.

Anyway, I disinfected the saw with the boiling water in the iron pot.

This was the climax of the dismembering, 「vertical cut」.

I will be sawing the backbone in half.

Not top and down halves, but left and right halves.

The carcass would then be split into the left and right half. This was 「splitting」.

After doing this, I would be able to dismember the rest easily... This was something I learned directly from the hunters.

This animal was huge, so it would be best to use an electric saw. But it couldn't be help since there wasn't even electricity here. No matter how physically strenuous it was, I had to accept it.

And so, I started my work.

As expected, this was the most strenuous part.

I worked hard with my saw in hand, and regretted my actions. No matter how difficult it was, I should have hung the carcass up before starting, it would have made this task much easier.

The saw was sharp and performed perfectly. If I was a weekend carpentry hobbyist, this would probably be a piece of cake.

But I didn't have such a hobby and fell into a tough battle. The fats on the backbone was very slippery, and sawing it in half was unbelievably difficult.

I would dissolve the fats on the saw with hot water from time to time, and took several breaks — I took at least an hour to finish the work. I kept separating bones from meat, picking out the back bone sawed off by me. I pulled out the ribs one at a time, and the waist was mostly meat so I just need to cut it off.

And finally —

「... It's done! 」 After yelling that, I laid down with my limbs spread out, then stood up immediately.

The job was finished, but I still needed to take care of the aftermath.

「Well then, it took so much work to cut the meat, I have to prevent it from spoiling and cure it with Pico leaves immediately.」

With Ai Fa's assistance, I marinated the mountain of meat with spices.

From the 70 kg Kiba, I cut out more than 40 kg, but less than 50 kg of meat. For an apprentice chef that's not a professional yet, this was great results.

「Ahhh, I'm beat! I can't raise my hands! 」

I could finally lay down sprawled out on the ground.

The light shining into the room was that of an evening setting sun.

From noon to evening, I worked for five to six hours. From my estimate, the time difference wasn't too big. A day in this world should be around 24 hours. I thought blankly as I laid down exhausted.

「... Hey, how are you going to deal with all this? 」

I turned my head when I heard someone talking, and Ai Fa was standing beside the stove with her feet wide apart.

On the broken door beside her feet was a large hide folded in half, a head with its cheeks carved out and a pile of bones.

「Oh right. It's a pity, but we can only throw the bones away... How do you usually deal with the hide? Even if you only take the legs, you will still peel it off, right? 」

「I will strip off the fats on it and throw away the rest. 」

「So you will throw it away, what a waste. The other families tans hide, right? Can you give it to them?」

「... If they get involved with me, that means antagonizing the Tsun clan. No one will offend the Tsun clan for the sake of some hide.」

「Tchh, such narrow minded people... Ah, fats can be used as fuel, right? How do you strip it off?」

I wanted to prop myself up when I said that, but Ai Fa stopped me coldly from getting up.

「Asking an exhausted person to help will just be trouble for me. Just lie down.」

「But...」

「My job is to strip the fats and collect the tusks and horns. Your job is to prepare dinner. Rest now before that.」

Her tone was cold, but her words made me grateful.

I had been working since morning, and I was literally exhausted now.

To be honest, my eyelids felt really heavy since a while ago.

I couldn't even tell if I said out loud 「you are really gentle」, and doze off into my dreams as if I was knocked out.

Part 3

When I opened my eyes, it was already dark.

Ai Fa lit the light stand with fire from the stove, and threw a sharp glare my way.

「You're finally up. If you slept any longer, I would have thrown water on you.」

「Don't go that far... How long did I sleep?」

Ai Fa tilted her head in silence and threw firewood into the stove.

Maybe the people of Forest's Edge didn't have the habit of demarcating time. They work when the sun rises and sleep when the sun sets, which was probably the unspoken rule of their routines.

「I threw the remains of the Kiba beast into the valley and spend some time washing the board... I'm getting hungry.」

「Understood. Then it's my turn to work.」

Splitting work this way wasn't too bad, and I walked happily to the food store.

Six fake onions.

Four fake potatoes.

And one Kiba hind leg was placed on what looks like a rubber tree leaf.

It goes without saying that this wasn't the preserved Kiba meat from before, but meat from the one I slaughtered earlier.

By right, I should use the preserved meat first, but I want Ai Fa to experience the joy of tasty food as soon as possible, and how delicious my cooking could be. So I ask her to let me use the freshly prepared meat.

「Are these vegetables the standard portion for one day?」

I wasn't sure if she understood what 「standard portion」 means, but Ai Fa simply answered 「We will die if we only eat meat.」

If humans didn't eat a balanced diet, they would fall ill.

However, I had not studied how to deal with these vegetables yet.

Nevermind, I will just give my best shot.

I washed the board used as a pot cover with water, then placed the Kiba meat on top of it.

And then — I picked up the Santoku knife from 『Tsurumi restaurant』.

This knife was a symbol of my old man's soul.

Grabbing the black handle, I drew it out from the plain white sheath to reveal its steel body.

The blade was 21 cm long. Despite over two decades of usage, the carefully crafted blade didn't warp at all. On the blade was the words 『Tsurumi restaurant』.

Dad, I will be using this.

I placed the blade on the Kiba meat.

Compared to aged pork, this meat was hard. The Santoku knife — sank into the meat without any resistance.

I was filled with joy when I looked at the sharp blade, but my movement was steady when I carved the meat off the bones.

Although white fats covered the surface of the meat, the inside of the thigh was a deep red.

In order to keep the blade from touching the bone, I kept a generous distance. After carving out the meat, I sliced it as thin as possible.

The texture of the meat might be hard, it was still raw meat in the end and couldn't be sliced too thinly. At my current skill level, 7 or 8 mm was the limit. This thickness should be just nice for a hot pot.

After cutting out around 500 grams, I placed the rest of the meat back into the storage room. I just need to to carve out the remaining meat on this large femur, and it would be enough for the two of us to eat.

「Right, I forgot to ask you one important thing. Ai Fa, is there any other ingredients or seasonings in this house?」

Ai Fa was observing my every move quietly, but she raised her head in surprise.

「If you eat Kiba, aria and poitan, you won't fall sick.」

「Yes, but there is another scent on your body. I can't tell if it is a flower, fruit or herb, but you're using something else, right?」

When she heard me say that, Ai Fa's cheeks turned red.

「Asuta, I wanted to tell you since yesterday, don't say things like 「you smell nice」, it's weird.」

「It's not a big deal. Telling someone that they smell nice is a compliment.」

「... But I can't take it if I almost get eaten!」

Ai Fa pressed the left side of her neck with her palm and stood up with a start.

That bite mark was still there. I felt a little embarrassed.

Ai Fa then disappeared into the food store with crude steps. She then returned with something strange in hand.

It was a round pot with a huge lid, and a fake rubber tree leaf that had been curled up into a ball.

The pot had a volume about 1 litre, and that ball of leaf was about a size of a human fist.

「This is fruit wine and salt.」

「Salt!」

Ai Fa looked displeased when I shouted loudly.

「I use the salt to make jerky. One Kiba horn worth of coins can only be exchanged for this much.」

A horn sounded in my mind when she opened that leaf ball. Inside it was pieces of beautiful blue crystals. This was probably rock salt.

I had only seen pink and yellow rock salt before, but I did hear that a type of blue rock salt exist.

I scraped off a small piece with my nails and after licking the powder, a strong salty taste exploded in a tiny region of my mouth. It taste great. Maybe because I sweated the entire day and loss plenty of salt, so I thought it was delicious.

「... Salt is expensive, don't waste it.」

「You are absolutely right! And this is fruit wine?」

I pulled out the cork made from softwood, and grape wine fragrance that had a strong hint of sourness whiffed out.

「Give me that.」

Ai Fa snatched it from my hands after saying that. After taking a large swig, she shoved it back to me.

「Eh, by the way, how old are you, Ai Fa?」

After saying 「Seventeen」, she licked her lips.

「I see, I'm seventeen too. We are the same age. Is this fruit wine expensive?」

「If I have spare coins after buying my necessities, I will change it for fruit wine. I don't like to bring coins back to the settlement.... There is nothing that is more valuable than salt and food ingredients.」

「Okay. I think the fruit wine would be of great use too... But all these seem unrelated from the scent on you.」

「Who knows! Aside from these, I only touched fruits that keep poisonous insects away, and the herbs used for making jerky!」

She didn't have to be so mad.

But from the looks of it, these ingredients would be enough. I was really happy to see 「salt」 appearing.

「Ai Fa, can I borrow your knife again?」

After getting the knife from the stiff faced girl, I carved off the remaining meat on the bones.

And we were all set.

The thigh meat on the Kiba was about 500g.

The meat carved from the bones was about 400g.

Fake onions, 6.

Fake potatoes, 4.

One dry Pico leaf that smells like black pepper.

And rock salt.

That was the ingredients for today.

And under Ai Fa's instructions, I grounded the rock salt into powder, and poured one large spoonful of it into the boiling pot.

That amount should do for today. Even with just one spoonful, adding salt would bring out a completely different taste.

Like last night, the pot was half filled with water. I think having less water would be better, but I could only figure things out regarding this through trial and error.

I then tossed the 900g of Kiba meat into the pot.

The red and white meat slices danced in the boiling water.

「Ah, Ai Fa, don't add firewood for now.」

Ai Fa was walking towards the stove, and she turned her head my way in surprise.

「If the Kiba meat isn't cook thoroughly, it will be very tough.」

「Yes, I plan to cook it with a small fire to make stew.」

Ai Fa started a large fire and cooked it for about twenty minutes. Although the meat was soft enough to chew, the texture was like rubber.

Boar meat would become softer the longer it was cooked.

That was the largest difference from pork raised in farms.

「Uwah, it's here.」

Tens of seconds after putting the meat into the pot, a large amount of foam appeared.

I took out the wooden ladle and container I prepared beforehand and carefully scooped out the foams and bubbles.

Because the meat was filled with fats, the amount of foam was much greater than yesterday.

Yes — Thinking back now, the thigh meat last night was all red without any fats.

It was the same for Kiba and boar, they only have fats in their thigh between the meat and skin. When Ai Fa cooks, she would slice the meat starting from the surface, so she would exhaust all the fats from the very beginning.

Boar meat without much fats wasn't suitable for hot pot (it should be the same for Kiba). That was why last night's meat was like rubber. As I kept on scooping up the foams, such thoughts filled my mind.

「Okay, the problem is, how should I deal with these.」

After clearing most of the foam, I replace the lid and left it alone for a while.

I sat in a position where I could check the stove fire, and faced the vegetables that looked like potatoes and onions.

「Fake onions, no, this is aria. It looks like an onion, so there should be a way to deal with it. This one is the problem — I want to ask, what exactly is a poitan? 」

「... It's a poitan.」

Ai Fa sat down with her back against the wall again. She supported her cheek with her hand and kept a stiff face.

「Two poitan, three aria and Kiba meat seasoned with Pico leaves. Eating these will provide you with the energy to work for one whole day. This is the knowledge we gain after living in Forest's Edge for eighty years.」

They probably get their salt from the jerky they eat during the day.

「Hmm.」

I nodded,

「By the way, how long is the average life expectancy of the people in Forest's Edge? 」

「Average life expectancy? If you want to ask how long everyone lives, it's different for everyone. Many of us lose our life because of attacks by Kiba and other beasts, not because of illness or old age.」

Ai Fa lowered her gaze.

She was probably thinking about her father.

「Leaving that aside... aside from those who starved to death or died in the forest, everyone should live more than 60 years. The grand elder of Forest's Edge is Jibae from the Wu Clan, she is more than 80 years old.」

「I see. Compared to my world, the people here live quite a long life.」

Her brown skin glisten under the glow of the orange light. There were white scars on her skin, but she still looked really soft.

With a 「Hmm」, I reached out to check how tender her skin was.

The next instant, she hit me in the head with her fist.

「My bad. Your muscles is tight and soft, very impressive. For athletes, this type of muscles is the best.」

I wanted to make the mood less solemn with a joke, but I seemed to have gone about it the wrong way. In the end, it only made Ai Fa show a vicious face, like a wild cat.

「I just want to know the health of the people living in Forest's Edge. At the very least, your diet isn't a problem.」

As expected, they eat the required amount of vegetables every day.

「Hmm, that will be my homework! I will study how to deal with poitan tomorrow. I already spent today working on Kiba beast.」

Ai Fa's eyes were still fierce, so I immediately fled back to the stove. I scoop up the new foams, add firewood, and kept the fire from becoming too weak. I repeated these tasks for quite a while.

「... I'm hungry. When can we eat?」

「hmm? I think it will take 60 to 90 minutes... About three to four times as long as yesterday.」

Ai Fa showed a shocked expression, and sighed depressedly.

「Sorry, I'm hungry too... I should have started preparation for dinner right after the butchering was done.」

「... I was the one who asked you to rest, and left the dinner preparation to you. You don't need to feel responsible.」

Ai Fa said seriously. But her expression look really sad.

Was she that hungry? I think that was really amusing.

An empty stomach was the best seasoning.

If I couldn't satisfy her, then my cooking skills would be too terrible.

Would I win or lose? In another hour or so, the match would be decided.

Part 4

「Alright, it's finished!」

Going by my rough gauge of time, it had been one hour and twenty minutes since I threw the Kiba meat into the pot. I finally announced its completion.

During this time, I scooped up the foams, adjusted the fire, checked the toughness of the meat, soothed the starving Ai Fa and occasionally talked about serious matters with her — These 80 minutes were happy and at times frustrating.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the Kiba meat.

It smelled stronger than the hot pot last night. Having fats played a huge role as expected.

But these trivial stuff didn't matter. Anyway, let's dig in!

「Sorry for the wait, have as much as you want.」

I stirred the pot with a ladle and filled one bowl for Ai Fa.

In the end, I didn't throw the fake potatoes, also known as poitan, into the pot.

After cooking for 60 minutes, I tried throwing slices of fake onions (which was aria) and fake black pepper (or Pico leaves) into the pot.

But even so, the soup stock was still very white and murky. The translucent bowl of soup was filled with the essence released from the meat. Yes, this wasn't a 『Kiba beast pot』. I dubbed it as 『Kiba meat soup』.

On second thought, this dish was indeed soup stocking from cooking meat, seasoned with just salt and spices. Instead of 「pot」, it was more fitting to call it 「soup」.

Since it was 「soup」, it was fine to complement it with onions. If only poitan was just like its appearance and be just like a potato.

Anyway, self suggestion¹³ played a big part in enjoying food too.

And so I presented this dish that I secretly dubbed 『Kiba meat soup』 to my beloved mistress.

「... It feels strange to not add poitan.」 Ai Fa smelled the soup suspiciously after saying that.

However, the hot pot yesterday smelled delicious too. Everything up until now was not very different from yesterday.

After scooping my own portion, I sat down opposite Ai Fa.

13 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autosuggestion>

「This is my experimental work number one. I'm actually not very confident. I plan to use this dish to set my foundation and improve on it in the future. Please tell me your honest opinion after this.」

「... I don't think food being tasty matters at all. It will be useless for me to tell you my comment.」

「I get it I get it... Then I'm digging in.」

Ai Fa closed her eyes, her left finger moved to her mouth and drew a line to the side as she mumbled to herself..

In this world, that gesture probably mean 「I'm digging in」. But I don't remember her making this gesture yesterday. Forget it, I was fine with it either way. It would be depressing for a chef if a world didn't have the concept of 「I'm digging in」 or 「Thank you for the meal」.

Anyway, let's eat.

I scooped up a spoonful of soup.

The black powder was spread out in the soup and could be seen everywhere. That was the powder from the pico leaf.

Both the presentation and fragrance was excellent.

However, things weren't that different from dinner last night so far.

I already test tasted a few times, but what kind of flavor would be brought out after the ingredients were combined? With a heart filled with expectation, I drank a mouthful — It was a success, very delicious.

This soup was rather plain, without any miso or soy sauce. The unique taste of the kiba meat and pico leaf were full of flavor. It was faint, but the stock was very fragrant and stimulated my appetite.

About a third of the water I poured into the pot had evaporated. The soup was rather thick. And the result of not adding water was a delicious pot of soup.

The next important thing was the kiba meat.

I only used a stick in lieu of chopsticks to checked its toughness, and this was my first time tasting it.

I didn't scoop up the pieces of meat I carved off from the bones, only going for the thigh meat for now. It had been dyed the color of ivory, and the white fats were shaking minutely in a cute manner.

The thigh meat was squarish and its sides were about 4 cm long, and 5mm thick. I sent it to my mouth in one go.

After chewing, the tender meat spread quickly.

How soft, the texture was softer than I expected.

But it was rather chewy.

The rubbery fats mixed came together with the elastic lean meat, and the fresh taste kept spreading in my mouth.

Ah — As expected, this was a high class ingredient.

Even though the meat wasn't aged, its taste could rival the boar pot I ate three years ago.

And of course, this was the crystalization of my effort in the slaughtering process, the day's hard labor and famished stomach, that's why it was so delicious — Even so, I wouldn't change my evaluation of this dish.

I could taste the fresh flavor of the meat directly because I didn't use any seasoning.

The primal taste unique to wild animals gave off a strong sense of presence... I had tasted wild beasts only a few times so it might be arrogant to say that, but just thinking about it in my heart shouldn't be going too far. I tried the aria too, and it was just right for the soup since I cooked it softer than yesterday.

When I sent the aria, meat and soup into my mouth at the same time, the taste became more complex. This onion (although it wasn't an onion) had a more prominent sweetness than spiciness. As its taste and texture wouldn't overwhelm that of the main dish, it greatly increased its quality.

Hmm, for experiment dish number 1, this is great.

When I thought this far, I looked in front of me and saw Ai Fa stood up with her dinnerware.

Her face was serious as usual as she walked to the stove in silence.

She already finished a bowl?

I'm happy to see that she found the food appetizing, but I was worried that she didn't savour the taste properly.

After refilling her bowl, she returned to her seat.

Ai Fa didn't meet my eyes at all.

At this point, the uneasiness in my heart had already grown to an unbearable stage.

「Let me ask you, what do you think? I think I cooked it really well.」

Ai Fa took a sip and tilted her head confusedly.

「What do you mean...? I already told you, it is meaningless for me to give you my opinion.」

「That might be so...」

I felt a sense of quivering from somewhere near my pelvis.

As if an unknown feeling was squirming about, seeking an exit.

Was it anger, sadness, depression or uneasiness — I wasn't sure what that exact feeling was, it was definitely 「negative」.

「J-Just to be sure, after I spent so much time cooking this meal is it... meaningless...?」

Ai Fa's expression turned even more confused.

She then looked into the content within her bowl.

The orange light made the shadows of her long eyelashes waver on her cheeks.

What should I do?

My heart was racing.

An ominous feeling creeping in my mind.

「... For me, eating is just for survival, and there isn't any difference whether its tasty or not.」

「... Yes.」

「I will feel troubled if you ask me to comment on the taste of your food, I won't know how to express it.」

「Yes, that's true.」

「But one thing is clear to me...」

Ai Fa raised her head slowly, her beautiful blue eyes staring straight at me.

「This is probably... what deliciousness feels like.」

Her pink lips revealed these words slowly.

「Eating is enjoyable now... comfortable... blissful. Is this how it feels to eat something delicious?」

I was speechless.

Ai Fa frowned a little painfully.

「I finally understand why you put in so much passion into cooking, and is stupidly serious about it... I think I understand now, it might be arrogant for me to think so, but at least I won't refute your actions.」

「Ai Fa...」

「I don't know how to express this. I can only say this much, but I think you did the right thing.」

It was slight but Ai Fa... raised the corner of her beautiful lips.

「So, don't show such a pained expression. This dish is delicious.」

I nodded in response, and focused on eating quietly.

I couldn't understand anymore.

The uneasiness from the depth of my guts had vanished, and had been replaced with the inside of my neck heating up and my back turning cold.

If I wasn't careful, I would have difficulty breathing.

I was probably — overjoyed.

The wide emotional swing made my emotions intense.

I must be hoping very much for Ai Fa to acknowledge me from the bottom of my heart. The intensity of this thought was stronger than I imagined.

In this world, only Ai Fa understands me.

She was my benefactor, and I hope she could acknowledge me.

On the surface, this mysterious beauty called Ai Fa might appear eccentric, forthright and barbaric like men. But she was gentler than anyone I knew. She probably had an emotional scar deep within her heart, so she didn't want to rely on anyone and live by herself. She was strong, beautiful, brave and delicate — And I hope she would accept me.

Damn it... But that's not my full power yet!

This spurred my competitive spirit and I chewed crudely on the Kiba meat. My fight wasn't over yet.

With my resolve set again, I glared at the enemy.

The fake potato — poitan was left on the ground beside the stove.

Intermission - Everyday life in Forest's Edge

The day in Forest's Edge settlement begins early in the morning.

The people start work at dawn, beginning immediately after getting up from bed.

Their work varies, but if they didn't have any pressing work at hand, they would start by tidying up last night's dinner.

They would place the used pots, utensils and cloth stained with fats into an iron pot, and clean them to the water source to wash. As for why they didn't clean it the night before? Although this was the territory cleared out by humans, they might still encounter dangerous wildlife when night falls.

The Kiba beasts were cautious and didn't appear often. But if they were hungry, they would still invade the residence of the humans. They would pass through Forest's Edge and head to Genos' western territory where the farmland was.

Aside from the Kiba, there was also the Manto, also known as the 「rotting flesh scout」, which had the appearance of a giant rat. Furthermore, venomous snakes and scorpions were very dangerous too. There wasn't any large predator that prey on humans, but a bite from these beasts would cause illness that would be hard to recover from.

And so, they would clean their kitchenwares in the morning, at the water source nearest to their respective homes. For Fa House, that would be one of the streams that branches out from Lanto river, about ten minutes walk away.

The stream passes through a stony riverbed. It might be a stream, but it was just like spring water that flowed through the mountains.

They would clean their pots and kitchenware there, using something like a brush, made by securing dried Kiba bristles. The pots and wares might be stained with oil, but they could be cleaned unexpectedly well after brushing it with the short bristles.

The stained clothes would be cleaned during this time too. As they had more time to spare, the denizens would use this time to do laundry too.

When their water flask run dry, they would refill it during this time too.

As the iron pots and water flasks were heavy, they would use something call a 「tow board」.

It was a large piece of wooden board used to carry cargo. The denizens would stick bristles on the reverse side, and coat it with solid fats.. They would then braid vines into ropes, securing them to the board and create handles from similar material. It could then be slung over their shoulders to tow the board.

As the board had been greased, the friction was reduced which ease about half the load. But if the water flasks were full, it would weigh about a hundred kilogram, and would be tough to pull.

The people from other families that I would run into at the water source were all women.

Most of them were middle aged housewives stronger than I was, but there were lots of old grandmothers and young girls too. Even they could pull the boards nonchalantly. I was sure that out of everyone there, I showed the most strained expression.

「What a weak man.」 And of course, that was the words of my dear mistress of the house.

By the way, early in the morning at the water source was the place where we could come into closest contact with other families. But as I expected, no one came near Ai Fa. Some women would greet her, but won't communicate further than that. We didn't hold much expectation either. The Tsun clan ruled Forest's Edge after all, so doing that would probably incur their wrath.

On top of that, a weak man suddenly appeared by Ai Fa's side, wearing a white chef uniform and T-shirt that was out of place with Forest's Edge, so the other denizens looked at Ai Fa with even more suspicious eyes — I thought that would happen, but no one did that. Everyone only looked from afar at me who was staying by Ai Fa's side, but no one met my eyes.

This might be a little off topic, but all these women were dressed in pretty clothes like the one Ai Fa wore. In order to not appear too prominent, most clothes had dull hues such as dark green or brown as its base color. However, they made use of these colors to add complicated spiral patterns on their clothes, giving them a traditional yet fashionable look.

The married women would wrap their body with a large piece of cloth, covering themselves from their chest to their knees.

Unmarried women would dress just like Ai Fa, covering their chest and waist with two separate pieces of cloth.

And of course, the other women didn't wore capes or secure large blades to their waists. Except when entering the forest, Ai Fa would carry a knife when she leaves the house. A lot of young girls would carry knives too. Even if they didn't hunt Kiba, these knives could be used to harvest herbs or cut vines, a very practical tool.

Everyone in the settlement had brown skin. They had varying hair and eye colour, but the most common was light brown hair and blue pupils. I had seen redheads and black hair too, there were many blondes like Ai Fa too. There should be women with black or brown pupils too, but they kept a distance from me, so I couldn't confirm.

However, no one had yellow skin like me.

Anyway, after finishing the work at the water source, what's next would be house chores.

We would maintain our blades every day.

We would check the condition of the blade and hilt. And if necessary, we would repair it. Grinding stone in this world looks like obsidian, a rough rock with a dark glister about it.

After that, we would check the ingredients in the food store.

Checking the aria and poitan was important too, but the main focus was still the Kiba meat.

As we checked the Kiba meat for damages, we would use the pico leaf to rub and knead them. If the pico leaves were just left there, it would absorb the moisture from the meat, so we needed to knead it once a day. This stops the meat from losing too much water to the pico leaves, which in turns depletes its preservation effectiveness.

Like the meat, the jerky was also buried in pico leaves. We would cut the needed amount of jerky at this time, and finally have breakfast. As we chew on the rubbery jerky, we would head into the forest.

Our goal was to collect herbs, firewood and to bathe.

The sun would have risen completely by this time.

Which means that Ai Fa did all these chores when I arrived at Ai Fa's place. In order to head into the forest, she completed all these chores before waking me.

However, not only did I slept so deeply, I even did something mean to her, a terrible shame. When I apologized again after the fact, she kicked my leg thrice. Damn, that hurts.

After dealing with all that, we headed into the forest.

First, we headed downstream of Lante river to bathe.

Yes, bathe.

The consecutive attack by the Madarama snake and the kiba the last time traumatized us. But my beloved mistress told me 「it is almost impossible for that to happen again」, and even looked at me coldly, as if contemplating how weak this man from another world was.

However, that Madarama snake was indeed the nemesis of the kiba. Because of its presence in the mountains, the kiba could only stay at the edge of the forest at the foot of the mountain. If the Madarama snake appears near the foot of the mountain, the kiba could only escape elsewhere, or their numbers would dwindle sharply.

Hence, it was rare to find Madarama snakes near the foot of the mountain. The one we saw probably lost its footing — or rather, its scalings and fell into the river. It was probably washed here by the current. What a troublesome snake.

After concluding that, I could finally enjoy my bath.

The average temperature here was about 30 degrees, and bathing in this climate was really comfortable.

I didn't have the habit of showering in the morning, but after a short while, I find this bathing time to be really blissful.

Going off topic again, I want to emphasize that since that accident, I had not breached any other Forest's Edge taboo. I swear on my very soul that I would not do that again.

After finishing our bath, we would forage for herbs.

The crucial pico leaves.

Pico leaves were our preservatives, and its effectiveness would deplete when it absorbed the moisture from the meat. Even if we stir it every day, it would last for just a month at most.

The meat storage was about 2m x 2m x 30cm. As we need to replenish such an amount of pico leaves monthly, we would collect a certain amount every day.

Without pico leaves, there would be no meat. This concerns our survival, so we needed to keep a careful count every day. If we didn't meet the necessary amount, we would prioritize our time to forage for pico leaves.

After foraging pico leaves, we would collect krilee fruits and lilo leaves.

Krilee fruits were used as repellent for harmful insects.

Many poisonous insects and venomous snakes lurk in the forest. In order to protect themselves, the denizens of Forest's Edge would weave wrist bands with these fruits. It gets in the way of my cooking, so I hung them around my neck. And by scattering them around the house, it would keep such insects and snakes from invading the house, so we needed to pick these plants periodically.

Lilo leaves were herbs needed to make jerky.

By the way, one of the fragrances from Ai Fa came from this herb. Its scent was calming and refreshing, and smelled elegant enough to be perfume. It also neutralized the stimulating smell of meat and fats, which was great.

However, I didn't tell Ai Fa all this. She would kick me if I did.

After the foraging was done, the last part was to gather firewood.

If there were enough branches on the ground, we would tie them up with vines growing nearby and bring them home. If not, we would break off smaller branches from the trees and leave it to dry at home.

There would be sudden downpours several times a day.

This natural phenomenon was unpredictable, and would sometimes drench all the firewood we gathered. But we weren't disheartened and would continue to gather more branches. Even if they got drenched by rain, we just needed to dry it. Such optimism were needed when living in Forest's Edge. And my cooking method would use up more firewood, so gathering them was an important task.

Which meant — all the work we do were important.

Even though I emphasized the importance of the pico leaves, it was just a matter of priority. If we didn't go about each tasks in order, we wouldn't be able to survive here.

Be it washing dishes, drawing water, grinding blades, food stock management, foraging herbs, gathering firewood or hunting kiba beasts, all this was for the sake of survival.

If we skip even one of these steps, we wouldn't be able to survive.

For the sake of survival, labor was mandatory. We can only survive after working the entire day.

Because the denizens of Forest's Edge lived such a life, they never thought about 「raising the quality of their food」.

Be it meat, aria or poitan, all this could be eaten after cooking them in a stew. No other procedure was needed. Eating was just for survival. Just like the other jobs, this was just a 「means」 to live on. It didn't hold any value as entertainment. The 「taste」 wasn't important.

They will die if they don't eat, so they eat. There's no other reason.

For living beings, that was the correct attitude.

Be it the kiba pot prepared by Ai Fa or the kiba meat soup cooked by me, both had nutritional value. Hence in this world, opting for the convenient and faster way was the right choice.

But I'm from a different world. I came from a world that understands the joy of 「eating」.

Therefore, I will strive on in my own path.

My battle in this different world was just beginning.

Chapter 4 - The Tiny Guest

Part 1

「Ugh.」

How many times have I moaned today?

The annoying poitan was rolling right before me.

It was noon, my fifth day in this different world.

Today, after we washed the dishes, took care of the food store and other routine chores, we made jerky.

This might sound a bit unnecessary, but these wasn't normal jerky, but smoked jerky.

Let me explain further. We used rock salt and pico leaves to knead the surface of the kiba meat, then used the fake rubber leaf (speaking of which, I haven't confirmed its actual name) to wrap it up. On the third night, we washed off the salt and herbs, and left it to dry til morning. The next morning, we hung the meat on a tree outside the house and lit a fire underneath it. Pico leaves and lilo were burned to smoke it until noon. And smoked kiba jerky was made.

This was the fourth morning of the smoked jerky making process. So Ai Fa didn't ask me to forage for firewood or herbs, and asked me to smoke kiba meat.

My job was simple, to add firewood and herbs so the fire wouldn't go out. But I need to watch it for several hours, and it wasn't a relaxing task. Even so, there wasn't any incident before noon and I successfully made a large amount of smoked meat.

Ai Fa went to the forest to forage like usual, and I stowed the smoke jerky into the food storage as I waited for her return, ending my job.

I worked until a bit after noon, and Ai Fa permitted me to study the poitan between noon and evening.

During this time, Ai Fa would head into the forest again in order to hunt kiba. Even though there were still piles of kiba meat, but in order to obtain poitan and aria, she had to hunt one kiba every five days. However, I didn't have any experience with hunting kiba and would just be in the way if I went with her, so I got this period of time to myself.

Ai Fa haven't hunted any kiba during this five days. Before I came here as a guest, she just needed to hunt one kiba every ten days, and hunting kiba wasn't an easy task. We got one kiba five days

ago (although it's an accident). Ai Fa said that it would be great if she could hunt one kiba either today or tomorrow.

And next, regarding my challenge.

I was busy with the butchering of the kiba on the first day. In the next four days, I work hard on my study of poitan — But the enemy was tenacious

Simply put, I didn't know what it was.

This plant probably didn't exist in my world.

It looks like a potato, although it was a hue lighter than a potato, the texture on its surface and its shape was just like a potato. However, its inside was completely different.

I tried eating it raw, and it was bitter and powdery, completely unsavory. As it lacked moisture, I suspect that it wasn't even a plant.

As everyone knows, boiling poitan in water would dissolve it into tasteless muddy water.

I tried adding it into my 『Kiba meat soup』, but there wasn't any improvements.

However, it seemed to contain nutrients necessary for humans. In the past four days, after we finished the meat and aria, I would add it into the soup before drinking it.

Using the soup from a hot pot to cook gruel should be exciting, but after adding in poitan, the entire pot of soup taste so nasty it felt like a kind of punishment game. Why do we have to drink this mud water? I was in despair.

That was why I was so troubled — I had yet to find a solution up til now.

Ai Fa permitted me to use one poitan a day for my research, but all my experiments ended in failure.

Boiling it in water would turn it into gruel.

Grilling it would turn it powdery and cakey.

It remained the same even if I soaked it in water.

When I fry it with animal oil, it produces a plate of powdery oil.

I even tried crushing it, frying it without oil, sunning it, I tried everything and still had no idea what to do.

「Ugh—」 I didn't know how many times I had made that sound.

The next instant, someone hit my head from behind.

「Shut up. Can you be quiet when you are troubled?」

And the one who hit me was of course Ai Fa.

She still haven't set off into the forest yet, and had been ransacking the storage room until now. But she seemed to have resolved the matter. She was dressed lightly as usual, with just cloth covering her chest and waist as she glared at me with her feet wide apart.

「That hurts. I don't want to sigh like that either...」

Midway through my sentence, I discovered something under Ai Fa's armpit. What was that? It seemed to be a bundle of beautifully dyed cloth.

Ai Fa noticed my gaze and spread out one of the cloth.

「These are the cloths my father left behind.」

I see. It was a sleeveless shirt with the front wide open. I should call it a vest. There wasn't any buttons on it, and it had strings at the bottom that could be tied together. The design was simple, and despite the colorful spiral designs, it looks rather fashionable.

「Wah, that's nice. It suits you」

Even though I said that sincerely, Ai Fa blushed for some reason.

「H-How can I wear this!? I might be the head of the house and a 《kiba hunter》, but I'm still a woman!」

「Ehh? I don't mean you should just wear this.」

I couldn't tell if this counted as a vest, but the front was designed to be open, just like the attire Aladdin wore. If she put this on without anything else — No no! That would be a slight against proper customs.

「If you want to wear this, you should put it over the clothes you are wearing right now! And you're too beautiful for me to think of you as a man...」

「Shut up! I want you to wear this!」

It had been a while since Ai Fa turned so raging mad, and she threw the clothes onto my face.

「Your attire is too prominent! When I'm out there with you, everyone will look at us with suspicious eyes, it's discomforting!」

Oh, I see. I also felt really prominent with my white attire at the water source in the morning.

And because I didn't have a change of clothes, I would switch between my t-shirt and chef uniform every day. As for my pants and underwear, I would wash it and then put it on while it was still wet.

But then, it was rather hot here, and the clothes would dry in just a few hours. Even if I didn't wash my clothes, it would rain heavily all of a sudden and drench me completely. Hence, I have already given up! But because I needed to work in the forest, I couldn't help feeling down as I watch my white chef uniform getting more and more dirty.

And so, I bowed deeply to my enraged mistress to express my thanks.

「I will accept this gratefully. But this must be important to you, right?」

「... If no one wears it, it will just be rubbish no matter how important it is.」

Ai Fa reached for the knife at her waist with a sour face.

I took a step back involuntarily, but Ai Fa handed that knife together with its sheath to me.

「My father left this behind too.」

On closer inspection, there was another knife on Ai Fa's waist.

「This knife... Can I really have it?」

「I'm just lending it to you! You always make my knife all oily, it's troubling for me! If the blade rust because of your negligence, I swear I will cut your ears off!」

「I get it. Thank you. I'm very thankful, I will treasure your late father's belongings. I promise.」

Ai Fa averted her face unhappily. But she didn't leave and just sat down beside me heavily.

「... So, have you found a way to turn poitan delicious?」

「I'm stuck at a bottleneck. After all, there wasn't similar vegetables from the world I was from. Kiba is similar to boars, aria looks like onions, but nothing is close to poitan.」

「In that case, you're giving up? There's nothing wrong... with staying this way.」

Ai Fa kept her head turned stubbornly and I looked at her profile from an extremely close distance.

「You're satisfied with that? I'm not satisfied at all! The 『kiba meat soup』 is getting closer to my ideal, but this thing made all my efforts a waste! I might still be an apprentice, but it trampled on my pride¹⁴ as a chef!」

「...Puraido?」

「Honour, or dignity.」

「I see... Recently, I have been thinking that eating delicious food is better than eating nasty tasting food. But you can't keep wasting the ingredients.」

¹⁴ pride is in english here.

「Yes, I know that...」

「These horns and tusks can be exchanged for things other than ingredients. If a knife breaks, it can be used to get new ones. Be it replacing torn clothes or medicine when we're ill, we will need these to exchange for them.」

Ai Fa touched the necklace on her chest.

「In the past, I just need to hunt one kiba beast every ten days for enough aria and poitan to survive, so I managed to save up some tusks and horns. But from now on, I will need to hunt one kiba every five days. I'm afraid my savings will deplete... in that case, we should cherish the ingredients.」

「I see, but you still agreed to let me use one poitan a day.」

That might be so, but I have already wasted four.

All because I was too useless.

「In that case, let's not waste this poitan today. I can eat one less, and use it to research...」

「You can't.」

Ai Fa's voice was unexpectedly firm, she leaned in close.

「I told you many times, you have to eat two poitan and three aria every day. This is the minimum requirement for the denizens of Forest's Edge to maintain their health. If you cut down on these, you will fall sick no matter how much kiba meat you eat.」

A blue fire seemed to be burning in Ai Fa's eyes.

The ethical concept of Forest's Edge probably didn't allow people to sacrifice their health for the sake of research.

No — Not just Forest's Edge. As a chef, I shouldn't do so either.

If a chef couldn't manage his own diet well, that would be like a doctor who didn't pay attention to his-well being or a dye worker who wears white clothes.

Of course I know that...

Chefs have to provide customers with delicious and nutritious meals. No matter how tasty the dish might be, it would be meaningless if it was harmful to the body. However, it was pointless for food to be nutritious if it tastes bad. The objective of a chef was to take care of both these criteria. I didn't know about other chefs, but my old man and I were chefs that took care of both factors.

And of course, some dishes prioritize the preference of the customers over nutritious value. I myself likes oily tonkotsu ramen.

But I couldn't do that for normal meals.

We would only eat junk food occasionally, that was why it tastes so good and exhilarating.

Because food contains the nutrition human needs, our body craves for food. However, since humans didn't live by our instincts, we might have lost this feeling — but even so, we shouldn't go against this fundamental condition.

Kiba meat really tastes great.

I could actually feel that it has the nutrients my body needs.

I could actually feel the nutrients merging into my flesh and blood.

There might be people who would mock me that this was just an illusion, but I was serious about this.

I want to continue making such dishes — Food that could give me such an impression.

I want the people important to me to taste delicious food beneficial to their body.

Eating poitan should be beneficial to the body. Ai Fa is the best proof of that.

Among the people I know, Ai Fa was the strongest and full of life.

If Ai Fa was nourished by the kiba, aria and poitan — then there must be a way to dine on them happily.

Poitan definitely contains nutrients beneficial to the human body...

...*Hmm?*

Beneficial nutrients?

Necessary for the human body?

Which means—

「I see! I see, so that's how it is!」

I yelled unconsciously, and grabbed Ai Fa's shoulders without thinking.

「I thought something was amiss! That something wasn't there! Damn, so that's it...!」

「... Why are you going crazy all of a sudden.」

When the troubled Ai Fa tried to move away I pulled her back my way unconsciously.

「Thanks to you, I found the answer! Ai Fa, you are wonderful!」

I swear all this was done unconsciously.

I hugged Ai Fa's body unconsciously, holding her slender body that was as tight as a whip.

And of course, my head was hit repeatedly a few seconds later, but I was lost in the moment because of my triumph.



Part 2

「Ai Fa I will be challenging a new menu today.」

Even though I announced that after the sun set, Ai Fa just said 「Whatever」 with a sour face.

Was she still holding a grudge for the lapse in my behaviour in the afternoon? Well, my actions was a little overboard — And I would definitely lose the court case if she accused me of sexual harassment. So it couldn't be helped if she became suspicious of my character.

「Although the 『kiba meat soup』 isn't bad, you will still grow tired of eating the same things everyday. Ai Fa, I will give you a big surprise this time, look forward to it.」

「Whatever.」

「... By the way, I wore your father's clothes right after borrowing it. How do I look? Does it suits me?」

「It doesn't. Looks funny. I shouldn't have loaned them to you.」

She was still throwing tantrums.

Nevermind, she will become happy when she eats delicious food.

By the way, it felt impractical to wear just a vest and a cloth around my waist, so I wore my t-shirt under my attire too. It might look a bit weird, but I was afraid of scalding myself when I cook, so I hope everyone could accommodate me. Please treat the white towel wrapped around my head as my standard equipment.

「Let me be frank then. I already prepared the poitan. It used up a lot of firewood, but I will pick more tomorrow, so please don't mind me.」

Ai Fa was expressionless and silent. She couldn't be bothered to even answer me.

After beating me up, she headed into the forest like usual. She shouldn't have seen how I cooked the poitan, wasn't she curious?

「Never mind, it's still early, but can I start cooking now? If you aren't hungry yet, try making yourself hungry.」

Unlike the stoic Ai Fa, I was feeling agitated. Because I was looking forward to challenging this new menu very much.

I plan to challenge grilling meat.

Not just a normal grill, I thought of many different ways of going about it, such as steaming it or grilling teriyaki style. But I wanted to try a dish I'm good at since I verified the poitan's true identity, so I will try the other ways another time.

I have no plans on being a tease. The dish today would be 『Kiba meat hamburg steak』 .

Or 『kiba steak』 .

I walked to the food store as I hummed, and carried the necessary ingredients to the stove.

Kiba thigh meat and breast meat, 500g each.

Six fake onions, or aria.

Two branches of pico leaves.

Fruit wine.

Rock salt.

And the magical essence obtained from the poitans.

As the essence wasn't much, I folded a fake rubber leaf as a container for it.

Well then, time to start cooking.

First, I took the thigh meat and cut off about a cm of fat from the top.

It was a bit of a pity, but I needed to use it as frying oil. All the fats on the fur had already been used to make candle, I will make sure to save some for cooking next time.

It has been five days since the butchering, and there wasn't any sign of decomposition on it at all. The preservation effect of pico leaves were excellent.

Even though the pico leaves were effective, I heard the meat would slowly rot after 15 to 20 days.

By that time, the meat could only be preserved by smoking them. There was still a mountain of meat that I butchered five days ago, and I was troubled every day, wondering if there was a better way to utilize them.

Anyway, time to start cooking.

I started a fire in the stove and diced two aria while I waited for the iron pot to heat up.

After finishing that, I prepared the meat.

I cut the thigh and breast meat into small pieces, then dice them even further with the kitchen knife.

I started by using Ai Fa's late father's knife.

And then with the Santoku knife that represented my old man's spirit.

Although there was about a kilogram of meat, it was a piece of cake. Hamburg steak was a popular dish in 『Tsurumi restaurant』 , and I was already used to this kind of work.

In less than 10 minutes, the kiba minced meat was done.

I turned to look at Ai Fa, and she was looking at me unhappily with the posture of the reclining buddha¹⁵.

She would usually sit quietly as if to show her respect for the chef. But it seems like her mood was terrible today. Didn't she have any comment about the kiba meat turning into small pink piles?

Suppressing the unease in my heart, I checked the fire.

I drip one drop of water into the pot, and it vaporized immediately.

It was time.

I threw in a piece of fat, and used a wooden spatula (which I made myself) to spread the fats evenly in the pot. I then threw in the two diced aria.

Unlike a flat saucepan, I couldn't toss the content of the iron pot. It was a bit tough, but I didn't give up, and kept stirring the pot with my wooden spatula.

When the color of the aria changed, I poured in fruit wine.

I stirred carefully until the alcohol evaporates.

After frying the green aria until it turned brown, I shift it into a container with the spatula.

When we made hamburg steaks in my shop, we would put in a quarter onion for every 200g of minced meat. Adding two whole onions for a kilogram of minced meat was a bit much. But kiba has a strong taste, so adding more aria wouldn't be a problem.

As I needed to wait for the hot aria to cool down to proceed with the next step, I used the time to cut the remaining aria. I didn't dice them this time and cut them into thin slices along the grain.

If I want to boil and soften it, I should cut it across the grain. But I want to bring out its texture this time, so I cut it this way.

I cut a total of four aria, and the pieces of aria piled on top of the fake rubber leaf like a small hill... This might be an extravagant wish, but I hope I could get a better container.

As I was bustling around, the aria had cool down. I placed the diced and fried aria and the kiba minced meat onto the fake rubber leaf.

I then sprinkled rock salt and pico leaf — at this moment, the magical essence made its debut.

I poured a certain cream colored sticky substance onto the pile of meat.

Next, I just needed to mix it well.

15 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reclining_Buddha

After kneading it with my hands for a few minutes, the minced meat turned sticky as expected.

Even though I cut off the fats from the thigh meat earlier, the breast meat still had plenty of fats. Both the tenderness of the minced meat and its luster were impeccable.

Feeling that my triumph was at hand, I felt a chill down my spine.

Brushing off the meat patty from my palms, I rubbed the excess fats from the kiba onto my palm to prevent the patty from sticking onto them. I will be kneading it into shape next.

If the patty was too big, it would be hard to control the temperature accordingly. I squeezed out about one sixth of the minced meat and kneaded it into an oval. Splat splat splat, I didn't forget to toss the meat between my hand to push out the air inside.

I made six mini hamburg steak, each was about 160g.

How cute. It was a beautiful pink color, and I felt like biting it just like that.

Leaving that for now, how's the fire?

Hmm, it's a bit too strong. I removed some firewood to adjust.

I could only gauge the intensity of the fire by sight, which was the biggest difficulty in making this dish.

Using strong fire in the beginning and reducing its strength — I couldn't make accurate adjustments like this, so I had a tough time. But it couldn't be helped, and I had to use my brain to decide this match. I needed the flexibility and imagination of my brain, followed by my judgement.

I threw in a piece of fat into the iron pot, and waited it to turn crisp and release its oil. After that, I finally put the hamburg steak in.

With a sizzling sound that was music to the ears, an appetizing fragrance filled the house.

As this was a round pot, I had to be careful about not letting the steaks stick together as I placed all six pieces into the pot quickly, and waited a few seconds.

It would be a waste of effort if I failed at this juncture. Paying attention to the change in the smell, I used the wooden spatula to check the heat.

Seemed that there wasn't any need to weaken the fire earlier. The steaks were about 60% cooked.

But that was better than burning the meat. Even if some juice leaks out, it could serve as part of the sauce. I believe that the kiba juice wasn't that limited.

After another few seconds, when the heat side turned just the right color of being cooked, I flipped the steaks.

Well, time to prepare for the next phase — When I backed away, I bumped into an obstacle.

Ai Fa was standing behind me and staring at the iron pot before I realized it.

「Uwah, you scared me! So you're here, Ai Fa!」

「... Why would I leave my own house?」

「No, that's not what I mean... Ah, sorry, I need to prepare a few things.」

I went around Ai Fa to grab the bottle of fruit wine, and the fake rubber leaf filled with arias.

I faced the iron pot once again, put down the bottle and checked the color of the hamburg steak.

The surface was about 80% done, it was about time.

「Be careful Ai Fa, the oil might splash around.」

She didn't reply, but I didn't have time to hesitate. I poured the fruit wine into the pot and covered the lid.

Psshh, splat splay, loud dull sound came out.

This was a unique way of cooking 『kiba steak』.

When making hamburg steak, strong fire would be used to grill both sides quickly to prevent the juice from being lost. To cook the inside of the steak completely, it would be grilled slowly over a small fire, or toast the steak in an oven. That was the right way of preparing it.

However, it was impossible for me to use either of these methods, so I opt to steam it. By doing so, I could cook the inside thoroughly before the hamburg steak got burned.

Hence, the patty I kneaded was thin and small.

As I couldn't tune the heat finely, and I needed to grill the surface of the steak with a strong fire — I had to go through the entire process with a strong flame. I had no choice but to knead the patty smaller and get it done quickly.

But even at this size, I would burn it if I tried to grill the entire steak until it's completely cooked. In that case, I could only use steaming to accelerate the heating.

It was a simple and logical conclusion.

「Alright, it should be ready now.」

I opened the lid, and the fragrance from the fruit wine burst out instantly.

I tried to split one steak in half with my spatula.

The inside was a beautiful ivory color, without a shred of red.

「Ai Fa, can you pass me the plates?」

I focused on keeping the other hamburg steaks from getting burned with my spatula. When Ai Fa heard what I said, she passed a wooden plate to me quietly.

I quickly scooped three hamburg steaks into the plate, took a new plate and rescued the remaining three steaks.

「Alright, only the aria is left now.」

The sauce made from the juice from the meat, fats and fruit wine boiled inside the iron pot.

I sprinkled in rock salt, and toss in pico leaves and the slices of aria.

I just need to fry the aria until it turns soft — and the job will be done.

「Ai Fa, pass the plates back to me for a while.」

When I said that, she passed the plates with the steaks back to me again.

Hmm? I was concentrating on the iron pot so I didn't realize it, but was she holding on to the plates with both hands and waiting for me?

She sure was considerate. Despite how cold she normally acts, I could feel her sincerity and kindness from the things she does.

Leaving that aside for now, back to the topic.

I divided the aria between the two plates, poured sauce over it with a wooden spoon, and the 『kiba steak』 was finished.

「Ah, please sit a while and wait for me.」

I rushed into the food store and took out the poitan I had left there for a long time.

However, I don't think anyone could tell it was poitan.

Ai Fa stared at the thing on the fake rubber leaf and tilted her head in confusion.

It was a flat, round, cream-coloured object, with signs of being grilled.

If someone from my hometown was to see this object, they might think it was an indian 「nan¹⁶」, or an 「Okonomiyaki¹⁷ without any toppings」.

It's true identity was a poitan.

「Let's eat it while it's hot! I will explain it to you later.」

16 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naan>

17 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Okonomiyaki>

Part 3

Let me start from the conclusion.

Poitan — should be a type of 「cereal¹⁸」.

This was my speculation. I didn't have any means to confirm this.

Anyway, after I made that assumption, I finally found a way to cook it, and succeeded.

The hint was 「nutritional value」.

It wasn't complicated at all, a grade schooler should be able to understand.

Kiba meat represented protein and fats.

Aria was a yellowish green vegetable, representing vitamins and fibre.

Then, what about carbohydrates? This question was like a divine revelation.

I wasn't sure how the body structure of people in this world was. But they looked similar to us, so I could use my common sense to probe this question.

Ai Fa was a healthy girl.

Her skin was beautiful and lustrous, and her body was like a sculpture, with arms stronger than mine.

Only a balanced diet could build a body like Ai Fa's.

And Ai Fa eats meat. She also eat vegetables. In that case, it would be unnatural for her to not consume carbohydrates.

Carbohydrates were a source of energy.

Ai Fa's energy could rival wild beasts, and she was always full of life. Therefore, I was certain she consumes carbohydrates.

「Poitan is a cereal, and a carbohydrate.」

Another factor leading to my conclusion was the poitan's 「texture」.

When I first ate it, I thought it was 「just like flour water」.

Flour was made from grinding wheat, a type of cereal, into powder. A type of cereal powder.

I didn't need to grill it, fry it or eat it raw. The answer was before me right from the start.

18 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cereal>

I should have paid more attention to Forest's Edge's food culture. Because 「boiling」 it was the only answer.

Doing so would remove the bitterness of the poitan, and dissolve it in water.

That would make the poitan edible.

But that would just turn it into tasteless mud water. Putting it in a more pleasant way, flour water.

Since that's flour water, I just need to turn it into flour.

After thinking it through, I started attacking the poitan.

I boiled it with a small amount of water, turning it into sticky and thick poitan juice. I then heat it as much as possible, and when it was about to be burned, the poitan became a slime-like semi liquid state.

I then sunned it for about an hour, and it finally solidified.

I knock it apart and tasted it — it was tasteless and powdery.

As expected, it was similar to 「flour」.

In that case, I will just use it like flour.

My prediction turned true.

I dissolved the powdered poitan into water, and heat it up. It didn't boil like raw poitan, but started to bubble and solidify, like an Okonomiyaki without any toppings.

I still had some sample on hand, so I tried grilling the semi fluid poitan that wasn't dried in the sun. However, they wouldn't solidify at all. After the water evaporates, only burnt powder was left behind.

The key was to dry it completely.

And of course, I didn't know what kind of changes happened to the molecular arrangement of the poitan, and I didn't want to know.

Anyway, I found the answer I was after.

And so — I finally conquered poitan, and while I immersed myself in the jubilation of victory, I also felt happy and hyped up. As flour had the 「binding」 property, the 「hamburg steak」 I wanted to challenge in the future was within my grasps.

Binding served to hold the minced meat together.

To do so, egg yolks and bread crumbs were usually used.

And of course, it was possible to make hamburg steak without the binding factor. I heard that adding ingredients to bind the hamburg steak was a culture unique to Japan. There was all kinds of theories, some say 「just adding salt will be enough」 and others say 「there is no need to add anything, just mixing it evenly would be enough」.

Even so, 『Tsurumi restaurant』 would still add binding ingredients. I would always add binding ingredients whenever I cook hamburg steak, so I wasn't motivated to make this dish all this while.

However, it was another matter if there was binding ingredients.

I could challenge steaming dishes or teriyaki-style dishes whenever I wish, these cooking methods were simpler than boiling.

So I thought, I might as well make a hamburg steak.

Hamburg steak was a type of processed food. It was a meat dish that didn't retain the original form of the meat. It was a common dish for me, but it would definitely look incredible to the people in this different world.

If I could make a hamburg steak successfully, how surprised would Ai Fa be — When I thought this far, my emotions got hyped up like a girl in love.

After several twists and turns, we started enjoying dinner on the fifth day.

「It might look completely different, but this is poitan. It doesn't have any taste by itself, so you can tear it into small pieces and eat it together with the meat. You can accept this way of eating it, right?」

Both of us had three small 『kiba steak』 each, with a side of sliced aria and large amount of fruit wine sauce.

And there was also a round grilled poitan, that looked like an okonomiyaki. It was about 30cm across, and 1 cm thick.

「Alright, I'm digging in.」

Ai Fa drew a horizontal line across her mouth with her left finger, mumbled something and then picked up the plate and spoon. She stared at the 『kiba steak』 on her plate with a confused face.

As I peeked at Ai Fa, I cut open the steak with my wooden spoon.

Well, the toughness wasn't a problem. The opened surface was juicy, it was well made.

But there was a problem with this hamburg steak, whether the ingredients meshes well.

People seldom make hamburg steak with boar meat.

Probably because boar meat wasn't suited for cooking hamburg steak.

Boar meat was softer than pork, but this property would only surface when 「boiled in water」. I remember the reason was tied to how much fats it have. Anyway, boar meat had the property of turning softer the more it was cooked.

If it was cooked in another way, boar would be classified by humans as tough meat.

Assuming boar meat was processed and cooked in the right way, it wouldn't be so tough and be as tender as beef or pork.

Hamburg steak was usually made with beef.

A mixture of pork and beef minced meat was a popular choice for hamburg steak too.

I seldom heard about pork being used to make hamburg steak.

Boars were a similar species to pigs, so the texture of its meat should be similar.

Boar meat was definitely not suited for hamburg steaks — and kiba meat was similar to boar meat. So how would the hamburg steak made from kiba fare? Even if it surprises Ai Fa, would I be satisfied with the results? — It was time to decide the match.

I scooped a spoonful of 「kiba steak」 and sent it into my mouth.

The juice was hot and spread in my mouth, almost scalding me.

My first impression was — 「sweet」.

Why was it like this, the meat was sweet and tasty. The unique taste of the meat and the fragrance of the fruit wine spread — I think this dish was delicious.

For a hamburg steak, the texture was rather chewy. I already worked hard to mince it, but it still had such a texture.

But it wasn't an unpleasant feeling. Instead of being tough, it was closer to being chewy.

And with its bite, more juice would flow out, the freshness and juice spreads in my mouth,

... Oh no.

As expected, I prefer meat with unique taste more than other people.

Be it boar meat, mutton or duck meat, I really like meat with its strong unique flavor.

And so... I really think it was delicious.

I couldn't judge it objectively.

In short, I felt this dish was delicious!

I sent another piece of meat into my mouth, together with the sliced aria and a large amount of sauce.

Delicious.

Super delicious.

I would probably give the same evaluation if I tasted boar meat hamburger steak.

I actually rated a dish I made so highly. It was embarrassing, but it was really tasty.

If I had to point out a flaw, that would be the thickness of the steak. It would be better for it to be thicker.

Compared to the cooked surface of the steak, the proportion of the juicy part in the middle was too little, this was the only point that dissatisfied me. I tore off some poitan and put it into my mouth, it tastes nice too.

Having rice to eat with this would be the most ideal. Meat needed a sides of vegetables and carbohydrates to complement it after all. Many nations wouldn't match these food together, but my country and family would do so. I feel that vegetables and carbohydrates were the perfect match for meat. Each of these components was necessary.

It had been a long time since I ate such tasteless carbohydrates.

I could feel my craving for carbohydrates exceeding my imagination.

The grilled poitan wasn't as soft as bread or naan, and it tasted like okonomiyaki that didn't have any eggs or toppings. Even so, I felt it was delicious.

One grilled poitan was too little for the three hamburger steak. Because the 『kiba steak』 had a heavy taste, I should be able to eat two pieces of poitan.

Not so long ago, I thought poitan was such a hated existence, and couldn't help laughing wryly. Someone retorted coldly: 「What are you smiling about?」

Ai Fa finally opened her golden mouth.

This wouldn't do. I was too engrossed in dinner and didn't realized Ai Fa's action.

My appetite was too strong, and I reflected on that a little.

「Oh right, how does it taste, Ai Fa?」

I looked at Ai Fa's way, and she had eaten more than half of the poitan and was about to finish her second 『kiba steak』. How fast, I just finished one.

After Ai Fa swallowed her food, she said 「it's good.」

「Thank you very much... ! But can you describe your comments in more detail?」

When she heard my question, Ai Fa said 「Don't wanna.」

「... Don't wanna?」

「Don't wanna. I don't wanna tell you my comment.」

「Eehhh, but why? Are you still bearing a grudge over what happened this afternoon?」

「What happened this afternoon?」 Ai Fa tilted her head.

「Ah, you mean that mean thing you did to me because you got too caught up? I already forgot about that.」

「You forgot... Then why won't you tell me what you think?」

「Shut up! I don't want to talk about it, that's why!」

Then something I couldn't understand happened.

Ai Fa blushed, she lowered her head and covered her face with her plate.

「Enough! Stop looking at me!」

I didn't get it at all.

Never mind, Milady's emotions were a bit unstable today, I will ask her again a few days later. Despite her adamant refusal, she did say 「it's good」 — Just these words made me very happy.

When I was thinking about that...

A voice came from an unexpected place.

「Hey, what're you eating?」

Ai Fa and I looked that way in surprise.

The voice came from the window beside the stove.

It was dark outside — and a small face appeared behind the window.

「I'm asking you two something! It smells nice, is that kiba? What is that white thing?」

「Rimee Wu... I told you to stay away from my house.」

The surprise on Ai Fa's face vanished. Seeing her answer nonchalantly made me sigh in relief. If she knew her, then it's not a problem. We weren't doing anything unsightly anyway.

By the way, who was this child?

As she was very short, I could only see her reddish brown hair and big round eyes through the window, but not her face.

「I don't wanna! I finally get to see you, why do you have to be so mean...? Answer my question! What are you eating? What does it taste like? Who made it? Is that man your husband? 」

「What nonsense are you saying!?! Why must I marry this weakling of a man!?! 」

Her words stabbed into me deeply.

However...

Even though Ai Fa was shouting that, her face had turned extremely red.

Hmm.

Since I got to see her like this, I would pretend I never heard that.

「Hey, who is this child? 」

Even though I was asking Ai Fa, the girl was the one who answered me.

「I'm Rimee Wu! Youngest daughter of the Wu Clan! I'm a good friend of Ai Fa! 」

「Don't joke with me. I don't remember being your friend, Rimee Wu. 」

Ai Fa picked at her last piece of hamburger steak and said in an exceptionally cold tone.

「I hate noisy kids like you. Scram on home. 」

After she said that...

The kid called Rimee Wu's eyes looked shocked.

The next instant, her emotions exploded.

「Uwaaahhhhhh! 」

She started wailing loudly.

「Hey Ai Fa, don't be so childish when you talk to kids... 」 Even the sound of me admonishing Ai Fa was drowned out by her wailing.

Her wail was incredible, and my ear drums hurts.

「But I like Ai Fa so much ahhhhhh! 」 I finally made out one of her sentence.

No matter what...

The young daughter of Wu Clan, Rimee Wu will have a decisive impact on my fate in the future. And that was how I met her.

Part 4

「I really like Ai Fa, and Gill Fa. When Gill Fa was still alive, he and Ai Fa would often play with me!」

A few minutes later...

The mysterious guest Rimee sat between me and Ai Fa and said with a smile.

She looked completely different from her wailing face earlier.

Anyway, in order to stop her from crying, we ushered her into the house. But no matter how we tried soothing her, we couldn't stop her tears from falling.

But when Ai Fa nursed her temple and said as if she was suppressing a headache: 「... What I said was a lie, I don't hate you.」, Rimee Wu stopped crying immediately.

「But I offended the Tsun clan, so it's better for you to stay away from my house. I already explained that to you many times.」

「The Tsun clan is not scary at all! My daddy says so too! He says the Tsun clan successor is an idiot, and they will lose their position soon! The Wu clan will definitely become the leader of Forest's Edge!」

「The head of the Wu clan, Donda Wu is combative, this will just worsen the situation. If the Tsun clan and Wu clan starts a war, the Forest's Edge settlement might get destroyed.」

After Rimee Wu stopped crying, Ai Fa's attitude turned colder than normal once again.

Even so, Rimee Wu was still all smiles.

Her smile was really cute.

Rimee Wu was probably seven or eight. She looked cute and petite, her height didn't even reach my chest. Her reddish brown hair was cut very short, and looked fluffy like a dandelion. Her skin was chocolatey brown of course. Her eyes were the clear color of water, filled with light like the sky in spring.

She wore a large piece of cloth with beautiful patterns. It covered her right shoulder and waist, looking just like a mini dress with just a single strap. Her slender arms and legs were bare. As she was still young, this dressing looked pure and innocent.

A necklace swayed on her chest, with three pieces of either horns or tusks linked together.

I didn't think a child this small could hunt kiba, so this was probably an amulet or decorative accessories.

「... Hey, you are an outsider, right?」

She stared at me with her big eyes.

Her blue eyes were really pretty.

Even though both of them had blue eyes, her's were different from Ai Fa's deep blue pupils that would look like they were burning from time to time.

「Daddy Donda told me before! A suspicious person dressed weirdly had appeared in the Fa House. He might be an outsider, and will bring disaster. Before his identity is known, I mustn't go near the Fa House!」

「Is that so. But you are here even after he said that.」

Although half my mind was on the 『kiba steak』 that was getting cold, I still answered warmly.

「I didn't come earlier! But I saw you wearing Gill Fa's clothes today! So that means you're not an outsider anymore.」

I had a feeling it was so, but Ai Fa's father was really 「Gill Fa」 huh.

She kept bringing that name up, was it appropriate to do so? I couldn't judge.

「I want to ask! Since you gave the clothes from your family to this man, that means you accepted him as a your family, right? But he is not your husband?」

「Who knows such archaic customs!? He was an eyesore with his shabby clothes, so I just gave him some spare clothes!」

Ah, that hurts.

But Ai Fa's face was blushed.

I pray that her face wasn't red from rage, but I got to see such a cute side of her, so I would just pretend I didn't hear her rude remarks earlier.

「Rimee Wu, go home! I don't want to start a war between the Tsun clan and the Wu clan. Go home and don't come here again.」

「I don't wanna. Daddy Donda only told me to not go near outsiders. Since this person isn't an outsider anymore, it is fine.」

Rimee Wu was all smiles, and Ai Fa said 「whatever」 after glaring at her, then picked up her plate of food.

Rimee Wu's naive face was filled with intrigue.

「Hey, what is that? Why does it smell like that? Is that kiba meat? What is that flat thing that has the same colour as poitan?」

Ai Fa didn't answer and ate quietly.

Then me too — When I picked up my utensils, the girl turned her face my way with a start.

「You two carried a kiba back together, right? That kiba turned into this meat? Why is it this shape? Where is the poitan soup?」

「Erm... This is made by me... Its shape might be weird, but this is kiba meat, and that is poitan.」

My personality couldn't ignore such an innocent child, so I answered her.

Curiosity flashed across Rimee Wu's eyes once again, and she said something that I was already expecting.

「What does it taste like? I want to try!」

Suppressing a sigh, I turned towards Ai Fa.

「Ai Fa, is it a taboo to share my food with someone from another clan?」

「... There's no such taboo.」

Although Ai Fa looked very unhappy, she didn't stop me.

In that case, it should be fine to give this girl a bite. I was dedicated towards food, but I wasn't that gluttonous. Besides, the opinions of a third party was valuable to me as a chef.

「Well then, I will let her have a bite. It should taste completely different from kiba meat, so don't be surprised alright?」 After I said that, I offered my plate to her. But she just smiled and opened her mouth wide.

「Ahh.」

She wasn't on guard against me at all?

I felt Ai Fa's icy gaze on my right cheek as I cut a mouthful of steak with my spoon. I added two slices of aria and sent it into the girl's small mouth.

The girl shut her mouth shut strongly with a snap.

She then started to chew.

Her blue eyes blinked a few times, and widened even more.

「Erm, how does it taste...」 「Ah.」

She wanted more.

Nevermind, I could turn a blind eye to two mouthfuls.

But if she ask for more, it might affect onii-chan's nutritional needs.

As I thought about all these, I scooped up the same food and tore off a piece of grilled poitan for her.

Rimee Wu shut her mouth with a snap.

Chew chew.

Swallow.

She blinked her eyes.

Her thoughts were written on her face, I seldom see a child who fits the onomatopoeia so well.

「Good...」

「Hmm?」

「It taste good!」

She grabbed me tightly.

Ah, I felt so panicky when grabbed by a person who had lost themselves. I started reflecting on what I did to Ai Fa earlier.

No, now wasn't the time for reflection.

Rimee Wu's small fingers grabbed my t-shirt, and she shook my body with unimaginable strength.

「It's tasty! Very tasty! Why is it so tasty!? Is this really kiba? Why is it so soft!? Hey, why!?」

On the first night, I worked so hard to make Ai Fa say 「taste good」, but this little girl repeatedly said this phrase so easily.

But hearing her praise this dish felt blissful to me as a chef.

By the way, this girl has surprising strength. As a tribe of hunters, even the muscles of such a child was different from normal people.

「Stop it, don't bother our meal.」

At this point, Ai Fa spoke out to save me.

Before I realized it, she had finished her portion. She pulled Rimee Wu by the back of her neck and pulled her off me with ease.



「Eating is for the sake of living. If you get in the way of someone's meal, that is as good as threatening his life. That's a taboo, didn't your clan head taught you that?」

「... Sorry.」

Rimee Wu lowered her head and apologized as Ai Fa held her up in the air.

Her expression turned sullen suddenly.

「It is really delicious, thank you. Sorry for disturbing your meal, I...」 At this point, she tilted her head and blinked a few times.

Her actions really fits the onomatopoeia.

「... I don't know your name. What's your name?」

「I'm Tsurumi Asuta. If it's hard to pronounced, just call me Asuta.」

「Chooroo... Asuta. I am very thankful to Asuta of house Fa.」

She seemed to respect me more now. I waved at her warmly.

「It's fine, I was just surprised. Thank you for your compliment... Ai Fa, thank you for stopping her.」

Ai Fa sat back down with a hmmp.

After Ai Fa unhanded Rimee Wu, Rimee Wu sat down and hugged her knees in silence.

... I don't get the denizens of Forest's Edge at all.

This girl gets all excited over trivial things. But after living in this different world for five days, this was the first time I met a denizen of Forest's Edge who didn't shun Ai Fa.

The other denizens fear the Tsun clan and didn't interact with Ai Fa. In contrast, Rimee Wu didn't hide her affection for Ai Fa at all, which made me glad and I hope they could get along.

In the end, Ai Fa and Rimee both fell silent, so I had to eat my dinner quietly.

Although the food was cold, it still taste wonderful. Personally, I was satisfied with the results.

「I'm full... Well then, it's already dark. Rimee Wu, can you get home by yourself?」

When I asked that, Rimee Wu who was hugging her knees seemed to remember something and raised her head.

I thought she would stand up with a start, but she knelt on the rug and reached out to me with both hands.

「Rimee Wu of the Wu clan has a request for Asuta of House Fa! Can you lend me a hand?」

I was troubled and glanced Ai Fa's way.

Ai Fa got up on one knee and frowned confusedly.

「Please make this incredible meal for the Wu clan's grand elder Jiba Wu... She will die if things don't change!」

Large tear drops fell from Rimee Wu's blue eyes.

But she didn't wail loudly this time! Rimee Wu couldn't stop her tears, she covered her face and sobbed.

Part 5

「...Asuta, are you going to the Wu clan?」

Night has fallen.

「I will be back tomorrow morning.」

Rimee Wu bowed to us and went off home.

She only said to me 「You can give me your reply tomorrow」 and 「I will convince my family tonight.」

I put the used utensils and kitchenware into the iron pot, and my job was done. Usually, we will chat and then sleep — But tonight, Ai Fa merely fell silent without any expression.

I had to learn the common sense of this different world. So Ai Fa would spend some time before we sleep to tell me about the rules and taboo of Forest's Edge, legends of the kingdoms and the gods, or about the post station town in Genos' territory I had not visited before. She told me many things, but she was silent tonight.

After maintaining this status for some time, she finally said those words.

Ai Fa leaned against the wall and didn't look at me, her eyes gazing into the darkness outside the window.

The fire in the stove was out, and only the candlelight was left. I stared at her cold profile in the dim light and answered quietly:

「I want to go — That's how I feel right now.」

Jiba Wu was the grand elder of the Wu clan, and Rimee Wu hope I could cook for her — even though all of Rimee Wu's actions were exaggerated, what she described wasn't complicated.

The elderly grandmother Jiba Wu was 85, and almost all her teeth had fallen due to old age, so she couldn't eat properly.

And now, it took a lot of effort just for her to eat the diced kiba meat and boiled vegetable stew. And the amount she consumes decreases every day.

... There is no point in drinking these mud water-like thing every day in order to survive...

She said as she wept every day.

Despite being healthy a few years ago, she had grown weak and even her spirit was gradually weakening.

She really loved the youngest Rimee Wu, and her suffering must really hurt Rimee Wu.

When I think about how Rimee Wu feels, I want to make a trip to the Wu clan.

「But you don't agree, Ai Fa?」

When she heard my question, Ai Fa answered emotionlessly:

「... Although the Tsun clan led Forest's Edge for generations, the Wu clan could rival them. There had been bad blood between the two clans a few generations ago.」

「Bad blood?」

「About twenty years ago, there was a girl supposed to marry into the Wu clan, but people from the Tsun clan abducted her. The men from Wu were furious and stormed into the Tsun clan. The previous Tsun clan head said that the girl committed adultery despite being betrothed to another, and they had punished her according to the rules. The corpse of the girl was returned to the Wu clan.」

「.....」

「The girl probably killed herself before the other party could sully her. But there wasn't any evidence, so the Wu men could only curse and swear as they sheath their blades... If the Tsun and Wu clan fought, a war that would rend Forest's Edge in two would break out. And both parties would suffer tremendous losses. If the Tsun clan don't hand over the girl, the Wu clan would probably start a war anyway. But since the girl was dead, we won't fight for dead people. The two clans broke off all contacts, and they had not resolved their difference even now.」

「How discomfoting. Are all Tsun clansmen such terrible people?」

「Who knows. At least the men who inherited the bloodline of the clan head are all bad.」 Ai Fa didn't change her expression as she said these in a cold manner.

「And when I got into a dispute with Diga Tsun two years ago, the Wu clan head suggested that I marry into the Wu clan.」

「M... Marry into the Wu clan?」

「Donda said to me with a smile: 『That way, the Tsun clan won't go after you. Even if they tried, I would end the Tsun clan』 ... I rejected his offer and cut off ties with the Wu clan.」

「Ah... So that's what you mean when you say you 『don't want to spark off a war』 .」

「Even if the Wu clan don't help me, I won't yield to Diga Tsun. I shouldn't have any dealings with either family.」

「I see. I understand now. From your position, since I'm living under your roof, you won't tolerate it if I help the Wu clan.」

I sighed deeply.

Ai Fa then turned her head away, the corner of her mouth twisted as if she was mocking something

Such a smile didn't suit her.

「But even so, you still want to help Rimee Wu, right? That's the kind of man you are, Asuta.」

「Hmm...? That is true. That girl Rimee Wu looks like a good kid, and I want that grandmother to relive the joy of eating.」

「Yes. In that case, just do what you want to do.」

「Huh?」

「This is a simple matter. If you wish to help Rimee Wu and Jiba Wu, you have need to cut off relations with me. After that, you can just ask the Wu clan to take you in... It's simple, right?」

「What? I can't switch targets so easily, I'm not a frivolous girl.」

I shrugged, unable to understand what Ai Fa's true intention is.

「I'm not as troubled as you think. I feel sorry for Rimee Wu, but I will reject her proposal.」

「... What?」

「Even though Rimee Wu is an endearing child, I just met her, and I have never met that grandmother before... You might think this is cold of me, but if doing this puts you in a difficult position, then I won't be able to help after all.」

「... Why?」

Ai Fa snapped her head back.

She seemed to be very surprised.

「This expression isn't like her」, I thought as I act natural.

「You are asking me why. Compared to someone I didn't know and never met, you are more important to me... Don't make me say something so embarrassing, dummy.」

「.....」

「What is it? Isn't it great that I won't have anything to do with the Wu clan?」

「It isn't anything important, but if you save a member of the Wu clan, Donda Wu might ask me to marry into his clan again in the name of repaying a favor. If I reject him again, he will definitely think I'm insulting his clan and vent his anger on me.」

「What a difficult old man... By the way, does the young men from Wu clan lack charisma? He wants you to marry Rimee Wu's brother, right?」

I asked with half envy and half curiosity, and Ai Fa only answered coldly: 「I have already decided to live by 《hunting kiba》」.

「Women have to live a life weaving grass and tanning hides while waiting for their men to return. That doesn't suit my character. I want to be a hunter that lives in the forest and dies in the forest. I decided that when I lost my father Gill.」

「Well, it's a pity since you are so beautiful.」 She didn't retort despite my sarcastic comment.

An unknown emotion lit the fire in Ai Fa's eyes.

「Anyway, you don't need to worry. I will reject Rimee Wu's request, nothing will change. Even if I reject Rimee Wu, the Wu clan won't bear a grudge towards me.」

Rimee Wu said to me just now 「I will convince my father!」.

Which means this request came from Rimee Wu's own will. Even if she told her family about this, they might be suspicious about me and not be willing to accept my help.

「Why? If you end your relationship with me, you will be free to do as you please. In that case, why aren't you doing what you want? Instead of being together with an eccentric person like me, you probably want to help the Wu clan more.」

「I don't feel like helping them at all. You took so much care of me, just the thought of leaving you for such a reason to live with an unfamiliar family displeases me... Hey, you have been acting weird just now, just what do you want me to do?」

Ai Fa didn't answer me.

So I stood up, and sat cross legged before her.

Ai Fa lowered her head, an agitated flame still burned in her eyes.

「Ai Fa, if you think I'm a burden and want me to go, I will do that. But you don't think so, right? In that case, tell me what you really think.」

「.....」

「I can't tell what you are thinking, just tell me honestly. I will do what you wish, in a way you like.」

Ai Fa lift her head and stared at me straight.

Her eyes still had that blue flame — but she was a little teary.

「My father — Gill Fa passed away two years ago.」

Her pink lips formed these words quietly.

「Before father passed away, I was on good terms with Rimee Wu. Even though I didn't have much dealings with the Wu clan, Jiba Wu dotes on Rimee Wu and I had seen her a few times when I was young.」

「... I see.」

My heart tumbled when I saw her tearful eyes, and could only answer this way.

Ai Fa frowned a little painfully.

「I don't want to have anything to do with the Wu clan. But if Rimee Wu and Jiba Wu suffers... I will be sad too.」

「In that case... what you want the most is for me to break off my relationship with you and help Rimee Wu?」

When I said that, she grabbed me by the chest.

Her eyes burning with blue flames stared right at me.

And then...

A droplet slid quietly down from her tearful eyes.

「I also...」

Her voice was quivering a little.

「I also... don't know what to do.」

How could she not know?

I just need to break my relationship with her, and I would be able to help Rimee Wu.

If she didn't want to have any dealings with the Wu clan and wants to help Rimee Wu, this was the only way.

However...

Ai Fa's fingers grabbed my chest tightly.

She seemed tensed, as if I would disappear if she let go.

「I see.」

I placed my hands on Ai Fa's shoulders.

I felt her bare shoulders, her smooth skin and the warmth underneath that — and also her quivering.

I pulled her shoulders towards me.

Ai Fa's slender body fell onto my chest without any resistance.

「It can't be helped since you don't know. But it would be more appropriate if I didn't know what to do either.」

I could smell my favorite scent from Ai Fa, which stimulates my nasal cavity.

I felt that fragrance fill my heart, and said quietly:

「But, I know what I want to do the most... If you don't tell me what to do, can I do it my way? 」

「.....」

「I want to help Rimee Wu. But I don't want to leave you. So I will help the Rimee Wu and Jiba Wu you like so much officially as someone staying in the Fa house.」

After I said that, I patted Ai Fa's hair that had been tied up into a complicated braid.

「The dispute between the Tsun and Wu clan isn't important at all, right? Why should I abandon someone I cherished for such a stupid dispute? The important things related to the future of the settlement should be left to the old men who are responsible. Don't overlook your own feelings for such things.」

「.....」

「Let's help Rimee Wu together. Who cares what Rimee Wu's father says. If he brings up the matter about marriage again, just tell him to find a man more delicious than a kiba for you! 」

Ai Fa couldn't answer.

But her fingers grasped my chest tightly and her tears continued to wet my t-shirt.

Chapter 5 - The Wu Clan

Part 1

And so, we decided to head to the Wu clan's main house.

I was happy about reaching a conclusion, but this also created some problems. The next morning, Rimee Wu appeared before us as promised which made me realize the problems.

After completing our work at the water source, Rimee Wu came over when I was at home maintaining my blade. When I told her about agreeing to help, she shouted 「Thank you!」. Her smiling face made other people around her blissful too.

She then told me:

「In that case, come over to my place before sunset! I will prepare the ingredients.」

I tilted my head confusedly.

「What ingredients are you talking about? I plan to cook in this house, then deliver the finished product to your place.」

「You can't do that! The food you cooked here can only be eaten here!」

I didn't really get it, and after further questioning, I realized this was a rule in Forest's Edge.

The actual explanation was:

『The one cooking and the ones eating must enjoy the same meal in the same place.』

Simply put, this was an order to prevent others from making food harmful to the body.

「I don't really get it, but I just need to cook the meal at your place, and dine at the same place as Grandma Jiba Wu right?」

Heading to an unfamiliar place to cook was a little pressuring, but I wouldn't back down because of such trivial matters.

However, the real problem came right after that.

「Yes, but you won't just be cooking Grandma Jiba's share. My family is large and it will be tough, but I will work hard together with you.」

「Ehh? I won't just be cooking for Grandma, but everyone else too?」

「Yes, because we will be entrusting the hearth to you. Isn't that so?」

「Is that so?」

「Yes it is! Asuta, you're really weird.」

Even a child 7 or 8 years old thinks I'm weird.

Spare me, I'm still learning the rules of Forest's Edge.

「I understand. I just need to prepare everyone's share, right? I'm willing to cook for everyone. The more people who eats my cooking, the more driven I would be... How many people are there in the Wu family?」

「Hmm...」 Rimee Wu started counting her fingers.

When she counted all ten fingers, I couldn't help retorting in my heart.

「... Hmm, including me, there are thirteen!」

「T-Thirteen!? What a large family.」

「Ah, but Kota Wu is just one year old, and can only drink milk. So you just need to prepare food for the twelve of us. The women who are supposed to caretake the hearth will help you too!」

「Twelve huh... such a number won't be a problem for me. Can I cook the same dish as yesterday for everyone?」

「Yes of course! I'm looking forward to it too!」

「I see. But I don't think I can solve the issue by cooking for Grandma just once. I need to hold a lecture for the Wu clan women to learn how to cook those dishes, then I can rest easy...」

「What is a lecture?」

「What I mean is, I can't use the stove at your place every day, right? So from tomorrow onwards, you all will cook the delicious food for Grandma.」

「Ehh? I can make such delicious food too?」

「The temperature for that dish yesterday is a bit hard to control... Ah, by the way, you have 13 people in your family, so there's more than one pot, right?」

「Pots? Our house have 4 pots.」

「Four!? That's great!」

In the end, I became excited.

Using four pots to cook for a dozen people — No, including me and Ai Fa, it would be 14.

My adversary was an elderly person without teeth, and the people in the settlement who bore hostility towards me because I'm an outsider.

This development spurred my spirit as a chef instead.

「I understand. I will prepare the kiba meat here, can you prepare enough poitan and aria for everyone? And also rock salt and fruit wine.」

「Ehh? We have plenty of meat at my place.」

「The meat is the key. If there is a chance, I want to teach you the right way to slaughter that would make the meat taste good.」

I started thinking about the dishes in my mind.

Rimee Wu then walked towards me, and tugged the corner of my shirt a little hesitantly.

「Asuta, I'm really grateful. Now, Grandma Jiba won't cry about wanting to die... Thank you for accepting such a difficult task.」

「Don't cry. Dummy, we don't know if we can solve the problem yet.」

「Don't say that! It will be fine! The food you cooked tastes really good!」

Rimee Wu then turned towards Ai Fa who had been working on her blade in a corner of the house.

「Ai Fa, thank you too. When Grandma Jiba gets better, let's play together again. I'm going off first, see you in the evening!」

「Ah, my dish would require some time to prepare, can I intrude on your place before sunset?」

After I replied on behalf of the silent Ai Fa, Rimee Wu said 「Yes! I got it!」, showed us a brilliant smile and left.

Really, in a sense, she was full of life just like Ai Fa. I raised the corners of my lips.

「... Why are you smiling by yourself. What a disgusting man.」

「Ohh! Ai Fa! You're finally willing to speak with me! Although what you said was rather rude, but I feel relieved now.」

「... Shut up.」

Ai Fa sat with her back to the wall and didn't even look at me. She had a serious face as usual as she inspected the knife that had a silver glint.

However, I got to see her weak side yesterday and she must be feeling really troubled. I could tell how she feels very easily.

「But to think we have to dine with them too. Ai Fa you knew that from the start, right? 」

「Of course. That's what entrusting the hearth to you means. 」

Yes. The denizens of Forest's Edge thinks that caretaking the hearth was a job that required responsibility. I think this was a great rule.

「But in that case, we will need to face Rimee Wu's father... Ai Fa, you will come with me, right? 」

「Are you retarded? You don't even know the rules of this world, how can I let you go to another house alone!? 」

She roared and glared at my feet.

「... If you don't plan to cut off ties with me, then of course I will accompany you. 」

「That's true. If I went alone, I will be scared. It's great that you can accompany me. 」

I walked a few steps towards Ai Fa and sat down. I kept some distance away from her, just out of arm's reach.

Ai Fa didn't avert her eyes. She was looking at my feet just now, but has shifted her gaze to my chest now.

I put my hands on the ground and lowered my body in an attempt to meet her gaze. Not only didn't it work, she turned the point of her knife my way.

「Sorry, I was just kidding around. 」

「Can the Wu clan... really entrust their hearth to a man like you? 」

She looked at me after keeping her knife.

Frankly speaking, this was the first time Ai Fa looked me in the eye properly after I woke up today.

Her sensitive cheeks blushed again, but she didn't hold back and said to me in a rough tone:

「Entrusting one's hearth to another is equivalent to putting the lives of their family in your hands. If someone from the Wu clan fell ill after eating your food, they won't let us off so easily. They might cut off our ears, pull out all our teeth or banish us from Forest's Edge! 」

「Ehh, working the stove is so important but you gave me the job so easily. 」

「I don't care about such an archaic custom! But many people in Forest's Edge still hold such an opinion! 」

「I know, who do you think I am, I won't let them get food poisoning. 」

You are just a seventeen year old apprentice chef, right? ... I was hoping Ai Fa would retort like that, but she just pursed her pink lips shut and fell into silence.

Her cheeks were tinted red, like a kid who didn't want to admit her loss.

But this was just like her.

The sullen Ai Fa last night was completely unlike the usual her. But she was cuter the way she was now.

After a short silence, Ai Fa said: 「I'm telling you to not let down your guard.」

「I know how good your cooking skills are. If it's you, then you should be of help to Rimee Wu and Jiba Wu. But you have to watch your steps.」

「Uwah... I feel so moved.」

I want to go near her and hold her hand. But with how she was right now, she might really kill me if I did that. So I decided to restrain myself.

「Since you already said that, there wouldn't be a problem. Don't worry, I swear on what little honour I have that I will help Rimee Wu.」

And I have another reason now, which was 「For the sake of Ai Fa」.

In order to help Rimee Wu and Jiba Wu whom Ai Fa treasures, I will pick up my kitchen knife and fight hard.

Under such conditions, how could I be careless or arrogant?

I felt my body filled with hype and fighting spirit as I looked at Ai Fa who still had an unhappy face.

I will definitely complete this job properly.

For the person I respect the most in this different world.

Part 2

「Oh... So this is the Wu clan's courtyard.」

I said in awe.

It took about an hour to walk from the Fa house to the Wu clan. From the position of the sun, it was located some distance to the south of Fa house.

The Wu clan didn't have any building that was larger than the others. In place of that was many buildings in close proximity of each other. After coming to this world, this was the first time I saw such a sight.

Although these buildings had ample space and there was quite some distance between them, their difference from other residence was clear at a glance.

In the center of the buildings were a flat brown plaza, about half the size of a field found in schools. Seven wooden houses were built at its edges, surrounding it.

All the buildings were about twice as large as Ai Fa's house.

But even for a family of thirteen, they didn't need so many rooms — As I tilted my head in confusion, Ai Fa explained to me as she held the 5kg of kiba thigh meat wrapped in fake rubber leaves carefully:

「... The head of the clan would inherit the main house, if the brothers of clan head is to wed, they would build a new house near the main house. Several of them are the residence of the clan head's brothers.」

I was also carrying 5kg of Chuck Flap¹⁹ in my arms, and answered with a nod: 「I see.」

「Why is there a plaza in the middle? It looks big enough to hold a sports meet.」

「Sports meet...? This space is for celebrations or funerals. If everyone related to the Wu clan are to gather here, there would probably be more than a hundred people.」

Of the 500 denizens in Forest's Edge, a fifth of them were related to the Wu clan.

But thinking about it the other way, there were just 500 people in this settlement. If outsiders didn't come in, the village would be filled with one's relatives in no time.

「Enough talk. Let's go.」

Ai Fa said and started walking forth. I chased after her and entered the plaza.

When we reached the center of the plaza, a tiny figure appeared from the back of the house right in the center, and ran towards us.

「Ai Fa! Asuta! Welcome to the Wu clan! You are here really early.」

That figure was of course, Rimee Wu.

By the way, the time was right between noon and evening.

I felt it was about 3pm in the afternoon.

「Are we too early? I wanted to have more time to get things done.」

「No problem! Dear guests, please give me your knives for safekeeping!」

Ai Fa handed both her blades over silently.

19 <http://lamtc.com/latest/new-products/miyazaki-wagyu-a5-chuck>

I did not expect that and panicked a little.

「Rimee Wu, I want to ask. Is it okay for me to cook with my own knife?」

「Hmm? But we have many knives for cutting meat at our place too.」

「But my knife is a bit special.」

I drew out the Santoku knife at my waist, as if I was acting in a yakuza film.

But the way, my attire today was a t-shirt with a colorful vest over it. I wore a cloth around my waist, but had white shoes on and a white towel on my head, a mixture of many different elements.

To be honest, the white chef uniform represents the honor of a chef and I very much want to wear it. But I didn't want to dress like a foreigner too much, hence my strange get up.

Rimee Wu observed my Santoku knife curiously and said 「I see」, then tilted her head confusedly.

「In that case, please give me your knife first, I will return it to you at the stove! If you have the knife on you, I can't usher you in!」

I sighed and handed over the Santoku knife and my other knife.

One sabre, two knives and the Santoku knife. Rimee Wu took the four blades with respect, then turn around.

「This way please.」

What would happen next? I braced myself and prepare to meet the Wu family. A group appeared from both the entrance and the back of the building — all of them seemed to be frail women.

Oh right. During this time, all the men would head into the forest.

About six women stood in a line before us. I was surprised, but Ai Fa's attitude was calm as usual.

「I brought the guests! They are Ai Fa and Asuta from the Fa House!」

Six pairs of curious eyes watched us without reservation.

During these five days, the other people all politely ignored my existence, that was why their actions surprised me. Not only did they not ignore me, they even focused their gazes on me.

This was a large family of thirteen, so it wouldn't be strange for more than half the household to be women. But their imposing aura still surprised me.

Three of them were married and wore a long dress made from one piece of cloth.

Three of them were unwed, their long hair draped over their shoulders, with two pieces of cloth covering their chest and waist.

One of the married woman was an old lady. But she probably wasn't Grandma Jiba. She was plump and looked energetic. She also had the smell of fats about her.

Another one was a middle aged woman. She should be about my parents age. She looked healthy and robust would be a more appropriate way to describe her. She was also rather tall, and appears to be a strong mother.

And then — the other girls were all young.

Two of them looked older than I was. They should be about twenty years old.

One of them wore a long dress and had a really small baby in her arms.

Another one of the girls was about my age, and one more was a bit younger than me.

A total of six women.

Including the baby and Rimee Wu, there were eight people in total.

「This is grandma Ditto Min. Beside her is Mommy Mia Lei. Next is Sati Lei, she is my brother Jiza's wife, and the baby is Kota. Over there are my sisters Vena, Leina and Lala!」

「Hey, if you introduce in one go like that...」 My heart started racing suddenly.

「... Hey, did you say Leina²⁰?」

「What?」

The girl who was about my age tilted her head confusedly.

She had a head of black hair, which was rare in Forest's Edge. Her hair was tied at her left and right shoulders in a low ponytails. She was short and petite, and her innocent face resembles Rimee Wu a little... And of course, she had brown skin and blue eyes.

... Right. What am I thinking?

This girl just happen to share a name with my childhood friend.

But she looked completely different from Reina. Reina was more childish with short hair, and didn't look so prominent. The only thing they had in common was their small stature, their height only reaching my shoulders.

「Sorry, it's nothing. Because my friend had the same name as you, so I couldn't help reacting like that.」

20 Same pronunciation, but different way of writing.

「You know someone who has the same name as me?」

She showed an innocent smile which looked a little like Rimee Wu's smile.

Ah — Her smile was a bit similar to Reina. Reina was more childish than she looked, which also applies to this girl before me and Rimee Wu.

「... I am the head of House Fa, Ai Fa. This man is a member of my house, Asuta. We are here on Rimee Wu's bequest, to temporarily caretake the Wu clan's hearth.」

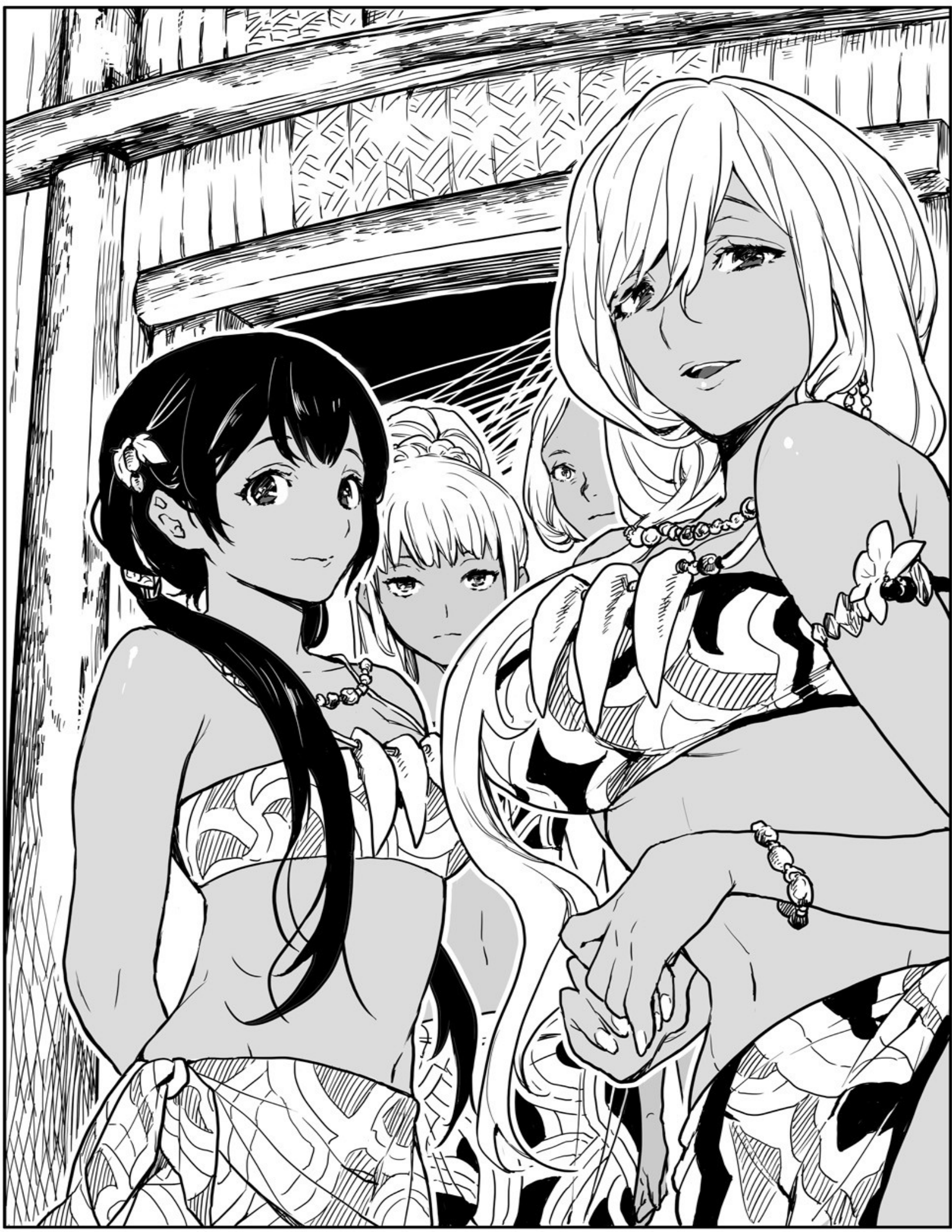
Ai Fa announced in a voice stiffer than usual.

「Ai Fa and Asuta from House Fa, we welcome you.」

The old lady who smelled like fats said to us. Her voice was just like her appearance, steady and gentle.

「The Wu clan welcomes your visit. Lala, safekeep the hunter's cape from our guest.」

「Eh? You want me to do it!?」 The girl who looked the youngest said unhappily.



She was about thirteen or fourteen, and looked as tough as a boy. Although her limbs and body were slim, she was taller than Leina. She had bright vermillion hair just like Rimee Wu, and tied her ponytail high on her head. Her eyes were bright blue like an ocean.

This girl named Lala walked forth reluctantly and received Ai Fa's fur cape. Grandma Ditto Min ignored her and smiled gently.

「Since you wish to use the stove as soon as possible, we finished our job to extract fats as fast as we could. You can use the room now. Who's scheduled to caretake the hearth today...?」

「Rimee, Grandma Ditto Min and Leina sis!」

「Right. Then Rimee, Leina and I will assist you.」

「Okay, thank you.」

This was unexpected.

I had braced myself for my visit into enemy territory, but the people here were — how should I say it, warm and rather friendly.

Only that red haired Lala looks a little displeased, everyone else had a smile on their faces. Compared to the people I encountered at the water source and on the road, their attitude was obviously different.

Ai Fa once rejected the demand of their clan head — Donda Wu, refusing to marry into the Wu clan. And I was an unknown foreigner (actually from another world). They don't seem to mind us much though.

「Well... Before we get to work, I want to confirm one thing...」

Someone said suddenly with a seductive voice.

It was the young girl who was older than me and not carrying a baby.

She tied her brown hair to the right, and because she only covered her breasts and waist with two pieces of cloth, it brings out her sexy curves even more.

「Asuta of House Fa... You came from a foreign country, right? But you didn't state your place of birth, is there a reason for that...?」

「No, I have no intention of hiding this.」

I already discussed this part with Ai Fa earlier.

I had no way of proving my identity, and what role I should play in my life in this world. As I didn't have much options, the decision was made easily.

「The people here seem unfamiliar with my birthplace... I came from a nation called Japan.」

Ai Fa and I chose to 「Tell everything honestly」 .

「Six days ago, I woke up at the foot of Mount Morga. However, I had no idea why I was here. The people here don't know about Japan, and I have never heard of the Amusehorn continent. But we could communicate clearly. I'm still confused about this and don't know what's going on.」

If I lied, I will be found out one day. And in the off chance that someone in this world had the same experience as me, I would miss the opportunity of learning that.

So I decided to share my experience, and be honest about what I didn't know — I only hid one thing. 「I died, but revived in this world」 , that would sound too unbelievable.

「I see... A foreigner who had never heard of Amusehorn...? Why did someone like that appear in the middle of this continent so suddenly...?」

This sister would pause for a bit in mid sentence, and her misty eyes made her more alluring. However, since she asked this, it means that she was the most guarded of the group, and has the quickest wit. I made a mental note of that.

「I really have no idea. After meeting Ai Fa in the forest, she took care of me and even worry for me. She says it is too dangerous for me to wander around without knowing the rules of Forest's Edge.」

「I see... Ai Fa of House Fa, your personality isn't bad... I thought you're only interested in hunting kiba like the men...」

Her words weren't malicious, but her tone had taunting undertones which made Ai Fa stiffen her face.

And of course, Ai Fa didn't reply. This sister looked at Ai Fa with coquettish eyes and laughed softly.

「No matter what, I'm looking forward to today. And you're here for our precious family grandma Jiba, right...? Although father Donda showed an annoyed face after learning that, I welcome you very much and is very grateful... I really mean it...」

「Eh, you flatter me.」

I gave a laughable response. When she saw how I was, she put her finger on her full lips and her laughter was like silver bells.

Every move of hers permeates a sexy charm, that should be her unique characteristics.

「... I am Vena Wu, eldest daughter of clan Wu... The second daughter is the black haired Leina, the third daughter is the redhead Lala, and the youngest daughter is Rimee... I will introduce my brothers to you when the men return from the forest...」

She then gestured her well proportioned arm towards the older group of women.

「This is the wife of the previous family head, Ditto Min, she will assist you later... Which means, she is my grandmother... Beside her is my mother, Mia Lei, the wife of the clan head Donda... And that is Sati Lei and her child Kota, the spouse of my oldest brother Jiza... The person you are helping is my great grandmother — Jiba, she is resting in the house right now... Ai Fa and Asuta from Fa House, nice to meet you...」

Part 3

「... This way please.」

The one leading us was the second daughter of the Wu clan, Leina Wu.

Rimee Wu entered the house to keep the guest's blades. The grandmother — Ditto Min still need to clean up for the fats extraction work too. The other women went back to their own work, and they left quickly.

The stove room was situated at the back of the building.

Large houses like this would separate the rooms and kitchen. They erected another building behind the main house that was half its size. There was a stove room, food store and kiba slaughter room.

「hmm? There's stoves over there too?」

There were two heavy stone stove beside the building, similar to the one in Ai Fa's place.

These two stoves were situated outdoors, and even had a beautiful wooden roof erected over it. The opening of the stoves faced each other, like two faceless monster glaring at each other²¹.

But there wasn't any iron pots on top of the stove.

「These stoves are used for grilling meat. My father Donda prefers grilled kiba meat.」

The petite girl who tied her black hair into two low ponytails smiled.

「I see! When you grill the kiba, there should be an astonishing amount of smoke. This thing is great. I will use this stove today then.」

「Eh?? Asuta, do you want to grill kiba meat?」

I was surprised for some reason and looked into the girl's round eyes.

21 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noppera-b%C5%8D>

Why was that? When I heard this girl with the same name as my childhood friend call my name, I felt a little strange.

However, Reina calls me 「Asuta-chan」 even in high school.

「... That's right, I planned to use grilling, is there any problem? 」

「 Well, Rimee told me that the meat she ate was very soft. So I thought you would cook a kiba stew... 」

「 I see. But I will be grilling the kiba meat. You might think my cooking method is weird, but I will take care of the troublesome steps, I will be counting on you for the other areas. 」

「 Okay! To me, Grandma Jiba is an irreplaceable family. I am very grateful for your help, Asuta! I will work hard! 」

This girl was really similar to Rimee Wu. She was cheerful, innocent, energetic and had sincere eyes.

Furthermore — Although this was unnecessary information, it was clear that she had inherited the same genes as that sexy eldest sister.

Her arms and thighs were rather thicc, and the curves on her breasts and hips were very feminine. Because she had a slim waist, she didn't look too fat — But I didn't know where I should look when I speak with her.

The girls in this settlement were too scantily clad. They seemed to think just covering their chest and waist was good enough. And the cloth they wrapped their body in was too thin, making the shape of their body clear at a glance.

And unlike the women I met in the settlement, they would wear 「accessories」 .

Bangles made from Krilee fruits seemed to be their standard equipment. Other than that, they would wear shiny silver hair accessories, ear rings, ankle bracelets and—

「...Ah. That necklace. 」

「Huh? 」

「 All of you are wearing three tusks or horns on your necklace. Is that some kind of charm? 」

「 Yes. Because women can't hunt kiba, the men will gift tusks and horns to us as a blessing for a safe life in Forest's Edge. 」

The necklace swayed before her bold cleavage. She held the necklace to her chest and smiled blissfully.

「Fathers would gift them to their children, husbands would gift them to their wives. The men won't give an entire set of horns and tusks, holding one back to signify that the kiba wasn't hunted by the women.」

「I see, what an interesting tradition.」

As I was answering Leina Wu, I felt a stabbing pain on the back of my neck. I turned back and found Ai Fa leaning against the wall, staring at us with icy eyes.

I didn't forget about my task at hand. My mistress, I was merely distracted by the outdoor stove.

「Erm, there are four stoves, huh? Let's start a fire in one of them.」

「Alright, please follow me.」

Leina Wu smiled again and walked towards Ai Fa.

She nodded towards the serious faced Ai Fa, then pulled open the sliding door beside her.

「This is the stove room.」

「I see.」

I walked forth as I answered Leina. I wanted to talk to Ai Fa, but my dear mistress averted her face strongly and stepped in before I did.

What was going on? I was confused, but felt that things would become troublesome.

Leaving that aside, I stepped into the room.

「Oh, this is cool.」

This room was only 8 tatami big, but it looked vast as there wasn't many items placed inside.

There were four stoves in a cluster right in the middle of the room. A working platform propped up by a log was placed beside each stove, along with a flask full of water. I was impressed.

The floor wasn't covered with rugs. The wooden walls and bare ceiling and beams were similar to Ai Fa's place.

However, there were an assortment of kitchen knives, ladles and stirrers hanging on the walls. The closet that didn't have a door was filled with plates, spoons and other utensils.

This was how a stove room, kitchen and food preparation room should look like.

I could feel my emotions getting hyped.

As I admired these kitchenwares, Leina Wu stood before the stove and showed a carefree smile as she said: 「Can I start the fire? Pray tell when you are ready.」 She actually used the term 'pray tell'.

Although she had a pure and innocent personality, she was very elegant.

By the way, the way they start a fire was just like Ai Fa. They would tie a dry leaf called karakara to the tip of a thin stick, then create friction by rubbing it against another firewood. The karakara would then burn like a matchstick.

They would take care not to let the fire go out, and wait for the other firewood to catch fire.

I also tried using this method to start a fire before, but would fail every two out of three attempts. Leina succeeded in just one try.

「Yes, can you help me boil half a pot of water? Use strong fire.」

Leina Wu acknowledged and started filling up the water.

... I could feel someone staring at my back, but I didn't do anything wrong this time, right?

「Okay, Ai Fa, give me the kiba meat. Miss, can I put the meat on that table?」

「Yes, of course... Excuse me, you can call me 『Leina』 .」

「Yes, you are right. But you have the same name as someone I know, so it feels weird.」

I took the pack of kiba meat from Ai Fa, and opened the fake rubber leaves wrapped around the meat.

Leina Wu then stood beside me, smiling close to my face.

「Asuta, that person must be important to you, that's why you can't bring yourself to address me with her name.」

「... That's not it.」

If not, then why? I didn't know either.

But, speaking of which — Aside from my family, I spent the most time with Reina. I didn't think of her as a love interest, but the thought that I could never see her again — still made my heart ache. That was the type of person she was to me.

That was why I didn't want to mention or hear her name.

I didn't think I should tell this to someone who shared her name.

「...Huh?」

As I was unwrapping the meat from the leaf, a small brown hand held my hand.

I was surprised and looked to the side. Leina Wu who was smiling just now looked down, as if she was about to cry.

「I'm sorry Asuta, I said something I shouldn't have. Your eyes look so sad...」

「No! It's nothing! I'm really fine! I'm just thinking about something!」

What was going on? I didn't come all the way here to act out a romantic comedy drama!

Ara, the back of my head hurts. As if someone stuck a pick made of ice into my brain. To think I could feel a person's gaze so clearly, did I have the talent to be a sword saint?

At this point, I heard a voice behind me saying 「Sorry for the wait, Asuta! Here's your knife!」, and someone poking my back, which made me scream.

「Uwahh!」

I thought a certain 「someone」 took the kitchen knife on the wall and stabbed me.

「Rimee, don't do that! You can't play with knives!」

「Eh? What's the harm, there's a sheath!」

I wiped away my cold sweat and grabbed the Santoku knife from Rimee Wu's fingers.

「A-Alright then, I need to cut the meat. Can you help me take enough poitan for everyone? After the water in the pot boils, help me throw them all into the pot.」

「I got it! Leina sis, let's go to the food store!」

「Okay.」

After the two close sisters left, only me and my mistress was left in the stove room.

I patted away the pico leaves stuck to the thigh meat, and cut through the surface of the meat. I then stole a glance at Ai Fa.

My mistress was leaning against the wall, with her legs crossed and one knee raised high.

「... Seems like I won't be of any help.」

「That's not true! You are my mental support! I could only focus on cooking because you are sitting there watching over me!」

「... Why are you so flustered?」

I wasn't flustered. If I was, it must be due to your voice being colder and lower than usual.

However, this was a precious opportunity to talk with Ai Fa in private. Her icy gaze was scary, but I still shared the thoughts I was harboring in my heart.

「... The Wu clan is friendlier than expected. I thought they would be a more hot blooded tribe of hunters.」

「Who knows. Aside from Rimee Wu and Jiba Wu, this is the first time I met them too.」

「Ah, have you seen their men before?」

「... When Donda Wu came to my house to propose a marriage, he brought all three sons with him. If you want to meet hot blooded people, just wait til evening.」

「No, I don't really want to...」

We exchanged just these few words when the two close sisters came back.

They held something like a sieve in their hands which contained a pile of fake potato, which was poitan. Each of the fourteen people need two, so there was 28 in total.

That was why the sisters had another helper. It was the grey haired and plump old lady, Ditto Min Wu.

「Sorry for the wait, I'm here to help... Ara, what a large piece of kiba leg meat.」

Her face was filled with wrinkles, but she seemed well. She turned towards Ai Fa with a smile.

「Ai Fa of House Fa, I heard that you watches over the Fa house by yourself. Did you hunt this kiba by yourself?」

「... Yes, that's right.」

Her tone might be cold, but Ai Fa still stood up politely and nodded.

「That's really impressive, didn't the Fa house break off all relationships with the other families? I couldn't imagine how a girl like you could defend your own home without relying on others.」

「... It's not difficult. My father taught me how to hunt kiba. He taught me the important points on surviving in Forest's Edge. I can live on without relying on anyone else.」

「Live alone and then die alone?」

A smile appeared on the old lady's face, as if she had seen through everything.

Ai Fa opened her mouth, but closed it without saying anything.

「If a woman is responsible for 《hunting kiba》, she can't bear and raise children, right? Live alone, die alone, and let the Fa house die out... Ai Fa of Fa house, are you satisfied about this?」

「... Many houses in Forest's Edge died out like this. Not everyone is as powerful as the Wu clan.」

「What? We aren't that capable. Leina, Rimee and I can't hunt kiba. No, even those men probably can't hunt kiba by themselves. Speaking of which, there are few who are as capable as you.」

「That's...」

「But the Fa house will die out, and the Wu bloodline will carry on, why is that... Maybe the Fa bloodline can be passed on too?」

「... What is Grandma Ditto Min talking about?」

The bored Rimee Wu who was poking the poitan asked me with a confused face.

The old lady looked my way and narrowed her eyes happily for some reason.

「Rimee, you will know after you grow up — the water is boiling.」

「Ah... I will put it in!」

When members of the same family address each other, they seem to omit the family name. Following Rimee Wu's energetic announcement, she took a slim kitchen knife from the wall.

She then looked at the boiling pot and tilted her head confusedly.

「Isn't there too little water? And you are cooking so many poitan with just one pot?」

「Yes, this is enough. If you want to eat the poitan you had yesterday, then throw it all in.」

「Okay!」

She took a poitan from the pile, slit on it with a knife, then threw it into the pot. As she was working through the pile, I was almost done with all the thigh meat.

I cut off the fats, and prepared to use it to cook. To make it more convenient to make mincemeat, I cut the red meat into adequate sizes. This wouldn't take much time, the meat was just about 5kg.

Grandma Ditto Min turned to me and smiled this time.

「Asuta of House Fa, your knifework is more nimble than a woman's.」

「That's right. I'm actually an apprentice chef in the country I was from.」

「Is that so.」

When she heard my reply, Grandma Ditto Min narrowed her eyes.

「A woman who hunts kiba partnered with a man who is good at cooking. What an interesting combination. Looks like I shouldn't say too much.」

「I agree, Grandma Ditto Min, it's better to not meddle in other's family affairs.」

Leina chided her in a childish tone.

This feels rather warming.

But I wasn't too relaxed.

When I turned my heart out of concern for how Ai Fa was faring, the female head of our house just showed a displeased face.

Part 4

Alright then, time to switch up the mood and focus.

I had been disturbed by the noise around me since just now and letting it affect my work a little. This wouldn't do for me who was on the lowest rung of the chef hierarchy. Father would never permit me to use his Santoku knife while being this flustered.

「... Cooking poitan this way is simple. If this dish fits Grand elder Jiba Wu's taste, then everyone can try making it from tomorrow onwards.」

While I was announcing that, the poitan was boiling inside the iron pot. I stirred it with a ladle, careful to not let it burn. The poitan had turned rather gooey at this point.

「Sorry, but are you planning to boil it until all the water evaporates?」

Leina Wu asked.

When I nodded to affirm that, her big round eyes showed her confusion.

「But, won't the poitan turn into a mud-like solid? I think it's hard to eat that...」

「Ehh? Leina Wu, you tried cooking poitan like this before?」

Leina Wu showed a surprised expression momentarily, then her eyes sparkled.

「Yes! I tried many ways to make poitan more palatable, but everyone scolds me for wasting food.」

For some reasons, she had a blissful smile on her face.

Why would she show such an expression at this juncture? Because I called her by her name for the first time? No, I need to focus, focus.

「Well then, I will leave the poitan to you, Leina Wu... It might be rude to ask, but do the people of Forest's Edge study cooking methods like this too?」

「Yes. We feel troubled after Grandma Jiba's body become like this... Can I let all the water evaporate?」

「Yes, be careful not to let it burn.」

「Okay!」

There was still some time before evening, so let's get the necessary task out of the way before then.

「Alright, first, I will prepare the kiba meat. The heat for this dish is hard to control. If possible, please remember this, it can be used on other dishes in the future too.」

After saying that, I opened the pack of chuck flap.

Rimee Wu then uttered: 「Hmm.」

「The shape of this meat is strange! Is this really kiba meat?」

「Hmm? What's strange? This is the meat from the back and shoulder of a kiba.」

「Ehh!? I never ate this type of meat before!」

「What? Your family have so many people, don't you bring the entire kiba home?」

「We only bring the entire beast back in order to skin them. Asuta, we only eat their hind thigh meat.」

Grandma Ditto Min replied.

「Why? Your family is huge, there shouldn't be enough thigh meat, right?」

「No, the men of Wu clan would hunt two kiba everyday. Even just taking the hind legs would be so much that we have to let some of these meat rot.」

「Two in just one day...」

I was shocked.

She was right. If one kiba is about 70kg, then the hind legs alone would be 20kg. Two kiba would be 40kg... Which couldn't be consumed in one day. Even if you include the parts to be smoked, they would just need one leg.

But I realized one thing. One kiba's tusks and horns could only be traded for 10 people's worth of aria and poitan.

And since the Wu clan had a dozen people (and one baby), hunting one kiba a day wouldn't be enough. There would be extra meat, but hunting two kiba would be the appropriate course of action.

And of course, I know that such a system would result in leftover meat. It was clear from the food store at my place too.

The kiba Ai Fa hunted six days ago still had about 45kg of meat left. After preserving it with pico leaves, it had shrunk to 40kg due to moisture loss. But Ai Fa and I could only eat one kilogram per

day. As they could only be preserved for 20 days, I would need to smoke more than half of these meat.

And in the meantime, Ai Fa also need to hunt one kiba every five days for their tusks and horns. The carcass of the kiba she hunts during this time would be left in the forest as food for the wildlife there.

Smoking the meat I spent so much time to bleed out was such a waste. That was why I felt rather happy that I could expend 10kg of meat in one go — However, learning that even such a large family would only eat the kiba's thigh meat made me a little sad.

While I was slicing the chuck flap, I glanced at grandma Ditto Min before me who looked really happy.

「So after hunting the kiba, you will skin them, cut off their tusks, horns and hind legs, then throw the rest away?」

「Yes, and to prevent the people of Forest's Edge from getting them, we will toss them down the valley. Monta builds their nest at the bottom of the valleys, and will guide the spirit of the kiba back into the forest.」

「... prevent the people of Forest's Edge from getting them?」

「That's right. If the people who can't hunt kiba finds these meat, they will just live on the meat cast away by others. Then people without honour will appear in Forest's Edge.」

So that was the so called honour of Forest's Edge.

Being from a different world, I couldn't understand this.

The thing I disagree with the most — was how they treat the delicious chuck flap and pork belly like garbage! Maybe my values were a little weird.

「If the men of such families get injured or become too old to hunt kiba, what will happen to them? I'm just asking for reference.」

「If anyone loses their strength, they will have to rely on their family. If their family is unable to render aid, they will need to rely on a more powerful clan. Even if they can't hunt kiba, that person will have the right to eat kiba meat if he can assist in other jobs.」

「I see.」

After hearing their explanation, I agreed with their ethical views a little more.

「I understand now, thank you... After slicing the meat like this, we will be mincing them with the knives.」

I focused on cooking once again.

This wasn't the time for me to collect information.

「We will use a big knife at first, it will be easier that way. Don't use too much force, use the weight of the knife itself to mince the meat evenly.」

「What is that!? It looks interesting! I want to try too!」

「Hmm...? Alright, I can let you handle it if it's just mincing meat.」

There was still a lot of time left. I could still finish the job for her if need be, so there wasn't any problem. And they would need to do this themselves in the future, so I want to teach them how to cook delicious kiba meat as much as possible.

「Uwah, it's all gooey, so fun!」

Rimee Wu might sound like she was playing, but the way she handled the kitchen knife wasn't dangerous at all. She might be young, but she was used to helping with house chores.

「E-Excuse me Asuta, I want to try it too!」

And of course the only one who talked to me like this was Leina Wu. She turned her head and peeked at my hands as she stirred the poitan juice.

I reserved 7kg of meat to make hamburg steak for 14 people. She didn't need to ask so desperately, she could mince as much as she wanted.

「Ah, the poitan is almost done. Erm, can we move the iron pot?」

「If we pass a stick through the pot handles, two people can move the pot together!」

「That's great. Well then, Ai Fa...」

「I can move it move it.」 Leina Wu smiled at me with a Krilee stick in hand.

In that case, then Ai Fa and Leina Wu... I considered it, but my instincts told me that I must not let the two of them work together.

And so, taking care not to get scalded, I picked up the handle on the side of the pot and pass the krilee stick through it. Leina Wu and I took some effort to carry the pot outside.

Ai Fa's gaze wasn't as icy as before, but after she spoke with Ditto Min, she turned quiet and her eyes were filled with sorrow.

I really hate seeing Ai Fa looking so depressed.

「So, what should we do with this pot of thing?」

「Ah, we need to put it in a place with plenty of sun and let it dry. Let's sprinkle some water on the outside of the pot to keep the poitan from getting burnt.」

「Okay!」

Although Ai Fa made me feel uneasy, the work ethics of the girl named Leina Wu was worthy of respect. She worked quickly and understand things fast, able to infer further things from my teachings. Rimee was this way too, she really wants to learn these skills quickly for the sake of grandma Jiba.

After we brought the poitan outside the room, I let Leina try cutting the meat, and she performed even better than Rimee Wu. The meat was minced so well that I didn't need to mince it any further.

As there were several knives, the 7kg of kiba meat was turned into a pink pile in no time after Ditto Min entered the fray.

They were really an excellent class of students.

「Hmm? Asuta! There are more meat here! Don't we need to make them gooey too?」

「Ah, just keep those meat like that. I need to use it for other dishes.」

Since she had problems with her teeth, I think I should prepare a soup. Aside from the 7kg of meat for hamburg steak, I need 3kg of chuck flap for that. When she heard what I said, Rimee Wu pouted:

「Tch!」

「I reversed the order, but we will need to deal with the aria next. I also need other ingredients, so Rimee Wu, can you bring me to the food store?」

「Yes!」

「Ahh, can you help me start the fire in the other stove...? Ai Fa help me carry the things.」

Ai Fa left the wall lethargically.

We handed the stove over to grandma Ditto Min, and the four of us headed to the food store.

There were three doors in this house, from right to left was the stove room, the food store and the dismembering room.

We opened the center door and stepped inside under Rimee Wu's lead. I let out a sigh in awe.

I never expected the inside to be such a scene.

It was filled with unfamiliar ingredients.

「What are these? This is incredible, it's like a treasure trove!」

I shouted upon seeing this sight.

Cupboards without any doors lined the space inside this 8 tatami big room. There were pumpkin-like fruits that was as red as a tomato. A green vegetable with leaves arranged like a rose. A mysterious bundle that looked like a coiled snake. Aside from these, there was a green skinned fruit with durian like thorns — anyway, it was filled with ingredients that weren't aria or poitan.

The familiar pico leaves and lilo leaves hung on the wall. However, there was a plant about two meters tall leaning on the wall, right beside these herbs. It was as thick as a bamboo, and full of wool like a burdock. Something that looked like dried yellow persimmon was also hanging on the wall.

I couldn't see any kiba meat. There was a door inside the room, that was probably the meat store.

The eight tatami wide space was filled with ingredients I had never seen before, it was like a paradise.

「Asuta! Here are the arias!」

Rimee Wu moved quickly between the shelves and ran to the right side of the room.

There was a large number of aria and poitan there.

「... There are so many vegetables in this world.」

「World...? Yes! If you throw them into the pot, the taste will change too, it's interesting! I like Tarapa. Leina likes Tino leaves!」

「But Rimee Wu, humans will be able to live just by eating aria and poitan.」

「Hmm? Yes, I think that's true! But you will get sick of the taste if you eat the same thing every day, right?」

I see, these ingredients were probably luxury items, only powerful clans could afford them.

No — these ingredients should be full of nutrients. Even if they were luxurious food, it also served as proper food and not just for indulgence.

By the way, aside from Rimee Wu and Lala Wu, the other women had fleshy bodies and looked very healthy.

Ever since I realized that poitan was a cereal, I thought the only vegetable in this world was aria and was a little depressed. From the looks of things, the women of the Wu clan supplement their nutrients by eating other vegetables.

But... In the end, no matter which vegetable, they are just tossed into the kiba pot along with the poitan, right? What a waste.

With so many ingredients, just how sumptuous of a meal could be made!? Just thinking about it made me tremble from excitement.

「If you wished to, you can use any of the ingredients here.」

Leina Wu smiled faintly at me.

When I heard her say that, I felt tempted, but I still rejected her firmly.

「I don't have time to taste test them. It's a pity, but let's not use these ingredients for now. If I use unfamiliar ingredients and destroy the taste of the dish, then it would be a waste of effort.」

I already spent four days to research poitan after all. My honour as a chef and Ai Fa's feelings were at stake today, I couldn't take the risk.

Speaking of which... I turned towards Ai Fa, and the mistress of my house was glaring fiercely at those things with a cold expression.

... That's right. We need to hunt a kiba every five days to secure the minimum amount of food. It's useless to envy people who are better off than we are.

I grow up in a family that operates an economical restaurant, ingredients like caviar²² or foie gras²³. Commoners didn't need to eat such extravagant food. I thought that way to change my mood.

And so, we carried enough aria for fourteen people, pottery bottles of fruit wine and a bag of rock salt and left the food store.

At this moment —

They appeared.

「What the hell is this? Kiba feces? Don't block the path with that thing!」

A hoarse voice came like thunder from inside the room, which hurts my ear.

A hint of tension flashed across Ai Fa's face.

「Hmm? Daddy Donda, welcome home! You are back early today!」

With a bottle in her arms, Rimee Wu ran towards the voice with a cheerful shout.

The moment we stepped out of the food store, four men with intense feral aura appeared before us.

A burly man stood at the very front, looking unhappily at the pot filled with cooked poitan placed along the pathway. That man looked over Rimee Wu's head and glared at us.

「Ho, so you're that outsider at Fa House? Everyone says your skin is white, so you're actually a weak pale skinned brat huh!」

22 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caviar>

23 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foie_gras

The burly man had a face full of beard, even his breathing was like a beast—

And that man was of course the head of the Wu clan, the father of Rimee Wu and the others, Donda Wu.

Chapter 6 - The Night of Blessing



Part 1

The group of men had an incredible aura about them.

They were the four men of the Wu clan.

Standing at the front was probably the clan head Donda Wu. Judging from both age and his demeanor, that should be him. He was above 180cm tall, and should be over 90kg.

He had a cape made from kiba fur, a sleeveless shirt and a piece of cloth tied around his waist. Around his neck was a necklace with a huge amount of tusks and horns. On his feet were shoes tied with strings, and he also had a large sabre and a knife — The four of them were dressed similarly.

But Donda Wu was exceptionally imposing.

Be it his arms, shoulders, thighs and calves, his muscles bulged like mountain ranges. His chest muscles were incredibly thick, and his waist looked powerful, just like a tree trunk.

His appearance was imposing too, his messy dark brown hair looked rough like a kiba, and a beard covered the lower half of his face. His eyes, mouth and nose were large, and the wrinkles on his face were as deep as cracks on boulders.

He was getting on in years, but his blue eyes were full of spirit. His large body that look as if it was carved from stone was brimming in life and give off a real sense of pressure to others.

If I had to describe him in one sentence — This large burly man was just like a kiba in human form.

In contrast...

The men behind him felt more like human.

Especially the one standing to Donda Wu's right, he felt gentle and kind.

He wasn't as bulky as his father, but his body was still solidly built. His arms was as thick as my calf, and he was carrying a 50kg young kiba with one arm easily.

That man had a similar face as his father, as hard as a boulder. But his brown hair was shaved really short, and his eyes were narrowed to a slit as if he was smiling. He had a very calm expression.

He might look gentle and kind, but his large body emitted an intangible prowess different from his father. I had a faint feeling that I must not anger this man.

He was a bit old too, while the other two men were younger.

One of them should be a few years older than me. He had a tall built and solid muscles, like a young wolf.

His face was a bit long and the bridge of his nose was high, with his mouth shut in a serious manner. He was handsome with black hair seldom seen in the settlement, and his long hair tied behind his neck.

However... his narrow eyes under his thin brows had a beast-like light about them, very similar to his father. In terms of the aura emitted, he resembled his father the most.

The last boy was younger than me. In my world, he would be in middle school.

Slightly shorter than me, he was slender when compared to the other men, but didn't feel weak at all. He was carrying a kiba that weighs about 100kg with a krilee stick together with the younger man I mentioned earlier.

He had mid length yellowish brown hair, with eye colors that was lighter than his hair. If not for his delinquent-like rebellious expression, he could be considered cute. The red haired girl who received Ai Fa's cape reluctantly resembles him a lot.

By the way, while carrying the kiba on one shoulder, he slung a bow and quiver on his other shoulder. This was the first time I see someone from this world carrying this weapon.

Anyway — This were the men of Wu clan.

Clan head Donda Wu and his three sons.

「Oh Rimee, what a considerate way of welcoming me.」

Rimee's father picked up the fruit wine his daughter was carrying with his stout fingers.

「Ah, you can't, that is for culinary use!」

「Hmmp! Culinary? Don't use those smartass terms.」

Donda Wu had white and tough teeth, just like a kiba. He bit off the cork off the bottle, and swig the red fluid down his throat.

Fruit wine wasn't as concentrated as red wine, but it still had a substantial amount of alcohol content. He emptied it in one go and tossed the bottle by his feet.

「Yo, the female hunter of House Fa. We haven't met since your dad died two years ago. It's been a long time, aren't you even going to greet me?」

His glowing eyes stared at Ai Fa.

Ai Fa pushed me behind and walked to the front of that burly man.

「Head of the Wu clan Donda Wu, long time no see... On Rimee Wu's bequest, my family member Asuta and I are here as temporary caretakers of the Wu clan's hearth.」

「Hmmp, you're an unlikable brat as usual. If your eyes didn't look so sharp, you would be a beauty just like your mother.」

Donda Wu had a large face, looking just like a cross between a kiba and a lion. He leaned his face near Ai Fa's nose.

「You are actually wearing the horns of a kiba like a man. But no matter how brave you are, you are still a weak girl, seems like you still can't understand this, huh? Ai Fa of house Fa?」

「I will watch over my home as the head of house Fa. I already told you that two years ago.」

I was surprised by how unfazed Ai Fa was in the face of such a scary man.

I couldn't see Ai Fa's expression from the angle I was standing from. But a fire that could rival Donda Wu was probably burning in her eyes.

This was like a scene of a wild cat facing off against a horde of kiba.

「Hah! Darum, how about it? Why don't you marry into the Fa house then? Then the Fa lineage will carry on. But you will need to be the hearth caretaker and raise the children then!」

The burly man leaned back and laughed thunderously.

The second youngest man who had eyes just like his father reacted.

His eyes that had a dangerous gleam turned towards Ai Fa, his gaze filled obviously with mockery.

「She has eyes like a beast, I don't want to marry such a woman. No, that's not a man or a woman, just a garbage.」

When I heard that, I wanted to step forward on reflex.

But Ai Fa who was standing diagonally before me, restraint me quickly.

「We still need to prepare dinner. We will talk after it's done.」

「That's right! We are about to start cooking! Don't bother me!」

In the eyes of a daughter, this beast like giant was just a father. Rimee yelled as she waved the empty bottle around without any fear at all.

On the other hand, Leina Wu held the sieve with the aria as she looked troubledly at the men facing off with Ai Fa. After looking at his daughters, Donda Wu turned and left with a 「Hah!」

「All of you are really ridiculous. Delaying your other work in order to prepare dinner so early? It's just eating the life of the kiba, there is no need for unnecessary work!」

「I already told you! We are cooking for the sake of grandma Jiba! Asuta's food is soft and delicious!」

The next moment, Donda Wu turned his back to his furious youngest daughter and changed his tone a little.

「... If we can't consume the meat of the kiba, only death awaits the denizens of Forest's Edge. Even a Wu or the greatest grand elder can't violate the law of the forest.」

His giant figure walked away slowly.

And then, something incredible happened.

Rimee Wu kicked her father's back.

「Daddy Donda you dummy! Why did you say something so mean to grandma Jiba!? You also cherish her a lot!」

「That's right! Grandma Jiba is the grand elder of the entire Forest's Edge, not just the Wu clan. How can the Wu clan head say something so reckless?」

Even Leina Wu yelled at her father's back with teary eyes.

「... Hmmp.」 Donda Wu grunted disinterestedly and disappeared into the depths of the building.

「Alright, let's take care of the kiba meat.」

Someone said nonchalantly with a deep voice.

The dangerous atmosphere chilled down.

「Ah, I haven't introduced myself. I'm the eldest son of the Wu clan, Jiza Wu. Ai Fa and Asuta of house Fa, I am very grateful to you two for making a trip here for grand elder Jiba Wu's sake.」

And of course, the one who spoke was the tall man who looked kind with narrow eyes .

「... But the Wu clan handing over the caretaking of the hearth to an outsider is an important event, right on the level of us offering our blades to the western god selva. I beg your understanding that our clan head Donda Wu can't just welcome you without any reservation.」

「Hmmp! Father always spoils that brat Rimee too much!」

The youngest boy with yellowish brown hair commented.

Rimee Wu glared at him immediately.

「What, you wanna fight? Bratty Ludo!?」

The boy and the girl glared at each other like two puppies.

Compared to that scene earlier, this was much more heartwarming.

「This shorter boy is my youngest brother, Ludo Wu. And this is the second son, Darum Wu. Jiba Wu's condition hurts all of our hearts. If you can save Jiba Wu's soul, we will show you our utmost gratitude and respect.」

He smiled slowly.

However, I couldn't read his emotions because his eyes were narrowed to a slit.

「... But if you harm the Wu clan's hearth or the lives of the Wu clan, we will have to cross swords. I hope you can keep that in mind. I will take my leave... Let's go, Darum, Ludo.」

The three brothers went into the dismembering room with the two kiba.

I sighed in relief after their figures were completely gone.

「Ara... They sure are intimidating. This is the first time I have seen the men of Forest's Edge from up close. Is everyone like them?」

「... The Wu clan is exceptionally powerful in the Forest's Edge settlement. It is only natural that the men who supports the entire clan is extraordinary.」

It had been a while since Ai Fa looked at me straight in the eye like this.

「Asuta, you can't back down now even if you're scared.」

「Don't worry, I live under the same roof with a scary mistress, so I'm used to it... that stings.」

She kicked my leg.

「That old man might be scary, but the most intimidating should be the eldest son. But what he said did stir up my fighting spirit.」

When I said that, the two close sisters looked my way at the same time.

「Asuta, you're amazing!」

「Ehh?」

「Jiza-Nii²⁴ is the most scary when he gets mad. If Jiza-Nii scolds me now, I will definitely cry like a child.」

「I-I see.」

「Also... When Rimee Wu wants to invite you and Ai Fa to our place, the one who objects most vehemently wasn't father, but Jiza-Nii. Jiza adheres to rules strictly, he can't accept outsiders caretaking the hearth in our house.」

24 Nii suffix means older brother

「... Thank you for your valuable information. My fighting spirit is burning more intensely now.」

I felt like scratching my head, but I couldn't do that with my hands full of aria.

「Well then... Rimee Wu, are there more fruit wine in the food store? To be honest, it will be bad if there isn't any.」

「Don't worry! There're loads! Father will drink 3 or 4 every day. We need to trade for it in the post station frequently, it's so tiring!」

Excellent, looks like I could safeguard my head.

No matter what, the things I needed to do remained the same. To use the ingredients I have to cook the best dish I could.

Not just grandma Jiba, I also need to make that father who is as large as a kiba, and that big brother who looks kind but is actually the hidden boss, speechless. Or else my life will be at peril...

With such a strong clan head and successor, I think the Wu clan's future would be smooth sailing.

Ah, speaking of which...

This wasn't the first time I met a man in Forest's Edge.

That first night when I came into this different world, didn't I encounter a burly man?

That burly man once visited Ai Fa who was depressed because of her father's death with ulterior motives. He was beaten up badly and thrown by Ai Fa into the river.

... That's the successor of the Tsun clan?

In that case, the match was already decided if war ever breaks out between the two clans, right?

I thought about these things and returned to the stove room with the other women and my mistress.

Part 2

「Ara... have you already finished dinner preparation...?」

When this person appeared, the dinner preparation was heading into its climax.

Right now — We have prepared the aria and kiba meat soup. The poitan for everyone had been grilled, and we were about to start grilling the hamburg steak and aria.

「Oh? What is it, Vena? It's rare seeing you in the stove room when you're not on duty.」

Ditto Min who was in the kitchen with everyone turned her head back.

The person standing at the entrance looking at us — was the eldest sister of the Wu clan, Vena. She twirled her long brown hair lazily and revealed a sexy smile.

「I didn't have any task at hand right now, so I came to take a look... But seems like my help isn't needed...」

As she could see, dinner preparation was almost complete even though there was still some time before sunset.

Rimee Wu, Leina Wu and grandma Ditto Min were more efficient than I expected, so work progressed this quickly.

This was a good miscalculation.

「After that, we just need to grill the kiba meat and we will be done, no problem...! Vena-Nee, you will burn it if I leave it to you, so no thanks.」

「Rimee, don't say that... we have guests...」

Vena Wu squirmed her elegant body bashfully.

This big sister was one sexy girl.

「But, I'm a bit worried... Father Donda looked even more unhappier than yesterday...?」

「Ignore him! Ai Fa and Asuta only took this tedious job for the sake of grandma Jiba!」

Rimee Wu stood beside Ai Fa and said with her cheeks puffed out.

By the way, Leina Wu stood beside me.

Vena Wu's crimson eyes looked between me and the second daughter of the Wu clan.

「That might be so, but if you incur the wrath of father Donda and Jiza-Nii, things will become complicated... What do you think, Leina...?」

「It will be fine. Asuta's cooking is amazing! I think grandma Jiba will be happy to eat it!」

Leina Wu announced. Her eyes were filled with her confidence in me, which made me embarrassed.

「Hmm...」

Vena Wu muttered as she looked at her sister, then revealed a cheerful smile.

「Since Leina who is good at caretaking the hearth said that, I can be at ease... But what is that pile of thing over there...?」

「Ah, that's poitan. After cooking the poitan, I dried it under the sun. After dissolving it in water and grilling it, it become like this.」

When she heard my answer, Vena's droopy eyes opened wide.

「This is poitan...? The shape of these meat is also strange...」

「This is because we minced the kiba meat before kneading them into this round shape. The tough kiba meat will turn soft like this.」

Vena Wu muttered 「Hmm...」 again after hearing my reply, and fell into deep thought.

「I have never seen such strange dishes even in the Genos post station... You really are from a nation far far away...」

「Yes, this is a common way of cooking in the place where I was born.」

After I answered like that, I turned towards Leina Wu beside me.

「But it should be difficult to remember this cooking method in just one day. From tomorrow onwards, you can just mince the meat like this and toss them directly into the soup.」

「Tossing the minced meat into the soup?」

「Yes, if you do that, you don't need to chew much. You can just drink the soup together with the meat. You can grill the meat before adding it into the soup, it will add more flavour and make the soup tastier.」

「After mincing the meat, grill it a little then add it into the soup? Do we need to cook it over a slow fire like today?」

「Yes. Add in the minced meat and aria at the very end, but add in the sliced meat at the beginning and cook with a slow fire. You can then get the essence release by two types of meat, making the stock more delicious.」

「I see. Thank you... Asuta, you are really knowledgeable, that surprises me.」

「Not at all, my family makes a living through cooking, so I would know a little about this.」

Her gaze filled with respect only made me feel embarrassed, and even a little painful. I was just a half assed apprentice chef.

However, since grandma Jiba who Ai Fa treasured so deeply had turned so frail, I have to work hard so she could find joy in eating again.

Eating is for the sake of survival — Ai Fa once told me that.

Even though this brave and simple tribe didn't care about how food tastes, they would be able to derive joy from it if they just paid a little more attention from eating.

Ai Fa and Rimee Wu both complimented the food I made, saying it's 「delicious」.

They acknowledged the value of tasty food, and experience it's joy too.

In that case, even though I was raised in a completely different environment and had vastly different values would be of use too.

I didn't know whether my arrival in this world was a prank by fate, but I want to live on here while maintaining my own way of doing things.

Culinary skills were the only thing I was proficient in. If my abilities could help a person Ai Fa treasures live a serene and fulfilled life, it would fill me with the utmost joy.

「Hmm...」

As I was thinking that — Vena Wu moaned at the same time and muttered:

「Asuta, you're really an unfathomable man... I heard the chef profession only exists in cities surrounded by stone walls...」

「I'm not born in an incredibly prosperous city though. This is probably just the difference in culture between our worlds.」

What was Vena Wu's objective?

The men led by Donda Wu showed clear hostility. I didn't feel that from Vena, and she didn't seem to be too guarded towards me. However — I have a feeling that she was observing me very calmly.

「But I don't know anything about cooking... If grandma Jiba can feel the joy of living, I will be very glad... Please work hard then...?」

Vena Wu left after saying these words.

After the source of excessive pheromones left, I sighed in relief.

「The lady named Vena Wu is an incredible person.」

「That's right, of the seven siblings, she is the most eccentric.」

Grandma Ditto Min's tone became friendlier and answered me spryly.

「She isn't a bad kid, but it's hard to tell what she is thinking at times. Although she is already twenty, there's still no sign of her marriage.」

「I see, that's strange since she is a very charming woman.」

The instant I said that, everyone's gaze gathered from all directions.

Well, there was just five people including me in the stove room, so all directions might be too much of an exaggeration.

「...Asuta, so you think Vena-Nee is very charming.」

One of the five people, Leina Wu looked at me with very sad eyes.

「Hmm? No, I'm not commenting subjective based on my perspective, I'm saying this from the view of normal people.」

「... Yes. Although she is my family, I think she is charming too.」

Then why did she looked at me with those eyes just now?

「But Vena-Nee is already twenty though. Asuta, you're seventeen just like Ai Fa, right? 」 Rimee Wu said.

Surprise was written all over her face.

「T-This has nothing to do with my age, right? By the way, why're you paying so much attention to my words? I don't understand.」

「... If you compliment a woman so openly, everyone will think you intend to take her as your wife.」

Even Ai Fa who had been quiet all this while said such things to me.

I couldn't rebuke her icy tone and gaze, and changed my attitude immediately.

「So that's what's going on. That was rude of me. I still don't know the etiquettes of Forest's Edge well, please forgive me... I don't mean anything else when I said that.」

「Don't worry, of course we won't mind hearing you compliment our family.」

Despite what grandma Ditto Min said, Leina Wu still showed a sorrowful face, while Rimee Wu stared at me incredulously. Ai Fa averted her face and seemed to be in a bad mood.

I really don't mean it...

Considering my current circumstances, I didn't have the mood for romance.

But this was a different world.

Their concept of love and marriage would probably be very different from my world, so I have to be more careful.

But no matter what—

Right now, Ai Fa was the only one in my heart.

What was this feeling then? The urge to repay my benefactor? A sense of closeness that develops naturally towards a housemate living under the same roof? Respect for her kind personality? I couldn't figure it out myself.

However — I wanted to live a proper life in this world because Ai Fa was here.

There was no question about that.

「... Well then, let's begin the last job.」

Following my announcement life returned to everyone's faces as they snapped out of their pondering expression, and they looked dependable and cheerful.

We were from different families and circumstances, but we worked together towards the same goal.

For Jiba Wu — the grand elder of the whole Forest's Edge to regain peace in her heart.

Part 3

It was finally time for the match.

Dusk, the time between day and night.

Inside the large hall within the Wu main house, candles were lit in all directions.

Accompanied by Leina Wu, the grand elder of the Wu clan Jiba Wu appeared with unsteady steps — And so, everyone was present.

This hall was about 20 tatami mats large, roughly twice the size of Ai Fa's house.

The room setup was not much different from Ai Fa's place, but many items adorned the walls in the hall. The men's blade and bows, fur capes and a spear-like weapon with a short handle all hung on the hooks made from kiba bones.

The clan head sat in the seat of honour, with a monstrous kiba hide hung behind him, as well as an ominous looking skull.

This Kiba was gigantic, it should weigh several hundreds of kilogram when it was still alive.

As a chef, I wouldn't be fazed even if I saw the hide or skeletons of animals. But that piece of hide was incredibly big it struck fear into my heart.

「Hmmp, everyone's present.」

Donda Wu took generous swigs from his fruit wine bottle as he said haughtily.

Jiba Wu sat down carefully beside him.

She looked really small probably because the man beside her was too massive.

Aside from the long dress married women would wear, she had a something like a shawl draped over her shoulders. She also had decorative items on her that seemed to be related to witchcraft. Her body had shrivelled so much that she looked like a piece of dried fruit.

Her back was hunched, so I couldn't tell her height, but she was definitely more petite than Leina Wu. Her head covered in silver hair was about the same size as Rimee Wu.

Jiba Wu's hair that had lost its colour pigment was tied into two low pigtails, similar to Leina Wu beside her. Her face was just like a monkey with plenty of wrinkles. I couldn't tell where her eyes were as she had too many wrinkles.

Her slim fingers extending out from her shawl was weak and boney like dried twigs. Her existence was as frail as a fog in the open plain. As if she would crumple if Leina Wu who was sitting down with her was to let go.

... Fortunately, she still have the strength to walk.

But letting an old lady eat meals centered around meat was asking for a bit too much.

But the die had been cast. We could only await the results.

Two longish stove was situated inside the hall, and the iron pot on the stove was making cute bobbling sound. These small stoves were not meant for cooking, but to keep the food warm.

Cooking wasn't done in the hall, and the food store was situated in another building, so there wasn't any smell of fats in the room. Hence, the fragrance of the food we cooked filled the room.

Fourteen people sat around the stove in an oval

At the top of the oval, which is the seat of honor, were Donda Wu and the grand elder Jiba.

Ai Fa and I were seated opposite the two of them some distance away, at the seat of least honour.

From my perspective, to my right were the three brothers, Jiza, Darum and Ludo.

Further in were the third sister Lala and youngest sister Rimee.

To my left was the wife of the previous clan head grandma Ditto Min, spouse of the clan head Mia Lei, wife of the eldest son, Sati Lei, and the eldest daughter Vena. To the left of Vena were Leina Wu's utensils.

Leina Wu was the representative of the hearth caretaking group today, and needed to help Jiba Wu eat. She could only dine after her work was done. Not just today, someone needed to take on this task every day. The elderly Jiba Wu was too weak, and couldn't eat by herself.

By the way, behind Sati Lei Wu was her baby, Kota Wu, who was sleeping soundly in a crib.

「... We offer thanks for the forest's grace...」

Even though Donda Wu looked like a beast he still announced with a serious tone.

He placed the fingers on his left hand that was as thick as a baseball glove before his mouth that was covered by his beard.

「…We offer thanks to Sati Min, Leina, Rimee, Ai Fa and Asuta for tending the fire in the hearth, so our lives can be extended tonight…」

Everyone repeated what he said, and drew a horizontal line with their fingertips.

This action — was exactly the same as what Ai Fa did every night before dinner.

Ai Fa always said it softly, so I couldn't hear what she said. So she was praying to god like this.

The thought that Ai Fa had been saying my name secretly every night made a weird feeling rose up in my heart.

And then—

After the short prayer ended, everyone started eating suddenly.

They didn't even wait for me and Ai Fa to pick up our spoons. If we had poisoned the food, they would be dead now.

They believed that we wouldn't do that — This was what 「tending the hearth」 meant.

That was why we couldn't afford to fail.

Specifically, I couldn't fail.

The five of us cooked this meal, but I was the one in charge. If there was any problem with dinner tonight, I would need to take full responsibility. Even if they spoke up for me, I was still prepared to take all responsibility for this.

I wouldn't like anyone else be harmed, be it Rimee Wu, Leina Wu or Ditto Min Wu — And of course, Ai Fa too.

Please, Leina Wu. Help grandma Jiba.

I finally reached for the utensils as I cheered Leina Wu on in my heart. She was a few metres away from me, right next to grandma Jiba.

I made the same dish as last night as per Rimee Wu's request.

The menu was 『Kiba hamburg steak with fruit wine sauce and a side of grilled aria』 .

However, on top of the 『grilled poitan』 , I also prepared 『kiba meat soup』 .

As the soup wasn't the main dish, I reduced the amount of meat and aria in them. This soup was meant to complement the main dish. Right now, the iron pot being heated up was filled with this soup.

After the pre meal prayers had been said, everyone started eating in silence. Grandma Ditto Min stood up immediately and poured soup into everyone's bowl.

During this time, Leina Wu who was beside grandma Jiba remained still.

Everything was going according to my plan.

I used this chance to check how dinner was and observed everyone's reaction — Simply put, everyone was just moving their spoons quietly.

Before dinner, when the five people in charge of cooking started filling the plates and serving them, everyone yelled loudly like Rimee Wu did yesterday. 「What is this? 」 「Is this kiba? 」 「What is this flat thing? 」 . But after my simple explanation about the dishes, I taught them how to eat these and what to look out for and they turned silent. The atmosphere was like a farewell party.

Some of them looked very unhappy, some were excited, some had sparkling eyes and those who decided to keep a straight face throughout. Their reaction all varied, but they were all very quiet as they waited for Jiba Wu to take her seat.

Then everyone turned quiet and concentrated on moving their spoons a little too anxiously.

Kiba hamburg steak, aria and kiba meat soup and grilled poitan. These three dishes was one set meal.

As the women had less appetite than men, I adjusted the portion when I was cooking. The hamburg steak for women used about 300g of minced meat, while the 700g was used for men. Ai Fa and I had normal 500g portions. Grandma Jiba had a smaller portion of about 200g.

Worth mentioning was that these weren't mini hamburg steak, but normal sized ones.

As there were several stoves in the Wu clan, I could cook hamburg steak in a normal way. I started by grilling the surface of the steak with a strong fire, then cook it thoroughly with a small flame. The women had one piece of steak, while the men's 700g steak was divided into two pieces. Every steak was thick and filling.

In the end, I still use fruit wine to steam them to add flavor. However, the decision to change the size of the steak made this product vastly different from yesterday. 「The hamburg steak not being thick enough 」 was the only thing I was dissatisfied about yesterday, and I have finally overcome this.

This was the right call. The hamburg steak increased to about 3cm thick, and was juicier than the steak I made yesterday. As a bigger portion of it wasn't grilled, it was more tender and juicy.

I was very satisfied by this dish.

As for the Wu clan — They remained silent as expected.

Some of them had a sour face like they did before the meal, some were smiling happily and some turned expressionless. There were all sorts of reactions, but no one expressed their views. Ai Fa was like this too, maybe they weren't used to chatting during meals.

By the way, the representative of the sour faces was the clan head Donda Wu. The representative of the happy faces was the eldest daughter Vena Wu, and the representative of the expressionless group was the second son Darum. The others could probably be categorized under being expressionless.

And of course, Rimee Wu eating nonstop with a big smile, but her blue eyes would turn grandma Jiba's way every now and then.

「Grandma Jiba, time for dinner. The dish today is very special. Our guests helped us cook a delicious meal.」

Leina Wu said as she moved her spoon towards grandma Jiba's mouth.

In the spoon was kiba meat soup. Leina tore off a piece of poitan and soaked it into the soup.

This was a method I thought up.

「This meat is soft, grandma Jiba should be able to eat this!」 Even though Rimee Wu said this encouragingly, I was from another world, and thought that 「hamburg steak is too greasy for an eighty year old grandma」.

So I decided to take it step by step.

First, let her eat the poitan soaked in soup.

Then the aria in the soup.

When both were done, then move on to the 「kiba steak」.

But the hamburg steak has to be soaked in the soup. That way, the minced meat would dissolve in her mouth even without chewing.

When she had tried all of the above, and she could eat the normal hamburg steak, then just feed it to her.

I didn't know how many teeth grandma Jiba had left. If she couldn't eat it, I don't think it's necessary to feed her hamburg steak.

Hence, I prepared the 『kiba meat soup』 .

I served this dish for grandma Jiba's sake.

In terms of menu planning, it would be better to have a soup complement the meal, and I think the others would be able to enjoy this soup too.

However, this soup was still specially made for grandma Jiba.

I sliced the aria thinner than what I preferred, and boiled it until it was so soft i couldn't feel the texture. As I used a lot of kiba meat on the hamburg steak, I only used a little meat for the soup.

The purpose of the kiba meat soup was to soften the poitan and hamburg steak.

This was actually the dish I prepared specially for grandma Jiba.

「Ah...」 Rimee Wu gasped.

I noticed it too.

Grandma Jiba kept shaking her head unhappy no matter how Leina Wu coaxed her. But she seemed to have given up now, and started sipping the soup in the spoon.

「It's tasty, right? There's still plenty more.」

Leina Wu said happily as she tore another piece of poitan and tossed it into the bowl.

But grandma Jiba didn't react.

It might be rude to say this, but she seemed to have ascended to the heavens after that mouthful — And didn't move at all.

「What's the matter? It's tasty, right? This is made by Rimee, grandma Ditto Min and me.」

Leina Wu seemed a little anxious and moved the spoon a bit forcefully near the old lady's mouth.

No, there's no need to rush. Let her eat at her own pace. As I said that in my heart — Grandma Jiba's mouth opened slightly.

Leina Wu seemed relieved as she pushed the spoon into the mouth that looked like a crack in the ground.

「Well then, how about some aria? It's soft and delicious too.」

When we were cooking, Leina Wu tried all the dishes.

This was my suggestion. If we want to coax grandma Jiba who didn't want to eat, it would be better for the one feeding her to know how it tastes.

「Asuta put in so much thought for the sake of grandma Jiba you have never met before...」
Although Leina Wu's eyes had turned red, as a chef, I think this was only natural.

I was also doing this for the sake of Rimee Wu and Ai Fa who cares about grandma Jiba. And as a chef, I also hope everyone can enjoy the dish I prepared. If a chef didn't consider all these, then he wasn't fit to be a chef.

「It's delicious right? How about some meat? The meat is also very soft.」

Leina Wu finally reached for the 『kiba steak』 with her spoon, and soaked about a half mouthful into the soup.

How would Jiba find it?

I cut the aria in the hamburg steak a little smaller than usual, but it was cooked in basically the same way.

I instructed Leina Wu to avoid the slightly charred surface, and feed grandma Jiba the tender meat inside the steak as much as possible. But if all her teeth had fallen off, she might choke on the minced meat and aria. I warned Leina Wu on the danger of this very clearly.

Leina Wu sent the meat and soup into grandma Jiba's mouth.

Her wrinkled mouth moved slowly.

And then—

A clear liquid flowed from where her eyes should be.

「This meat is delicious... Is this really kiba meat...?」

Grandma jiba's raspy voice reverberated inside the quiet hall.

Part 4

「Yes, this is kiba meat. It's tasty, right? Please have some more.」

Leina Wu's voice was choking a little.

Rimee Wu and the others held their plates and wept quietly.

And Ai Fa —

Stopped eating and lowered her head slightly with her eyes closed.

「Well then, let's try eating just the meat. The red gravy is fruit wine essence, it's very sweet and tasty.」

After a few mouthful of meat soaked in soup, Leina Wu cut off the 『Hamburg steak』 directly and sent it into the old lady's mouth.

All her front teeth had probably fallen off. Grandma Jiba opened his black hole like mouth and ate the 『kiba steak』 .

She chewed the meat, her jaws gradually moving more and more powerfully.

「This is really delicious... Really delicious. Kiba is actually so tasty...」

「What's so good about this thing? It's as soft as rotten meat, not fit to be eaten by humans!」

An angry roar erupted in the hall.

It was the clan head Donda Wu.

Donda Wu finished his meal faster than anyone else, then threw the empty plate onto the floor and took large swigs of fruit wine.

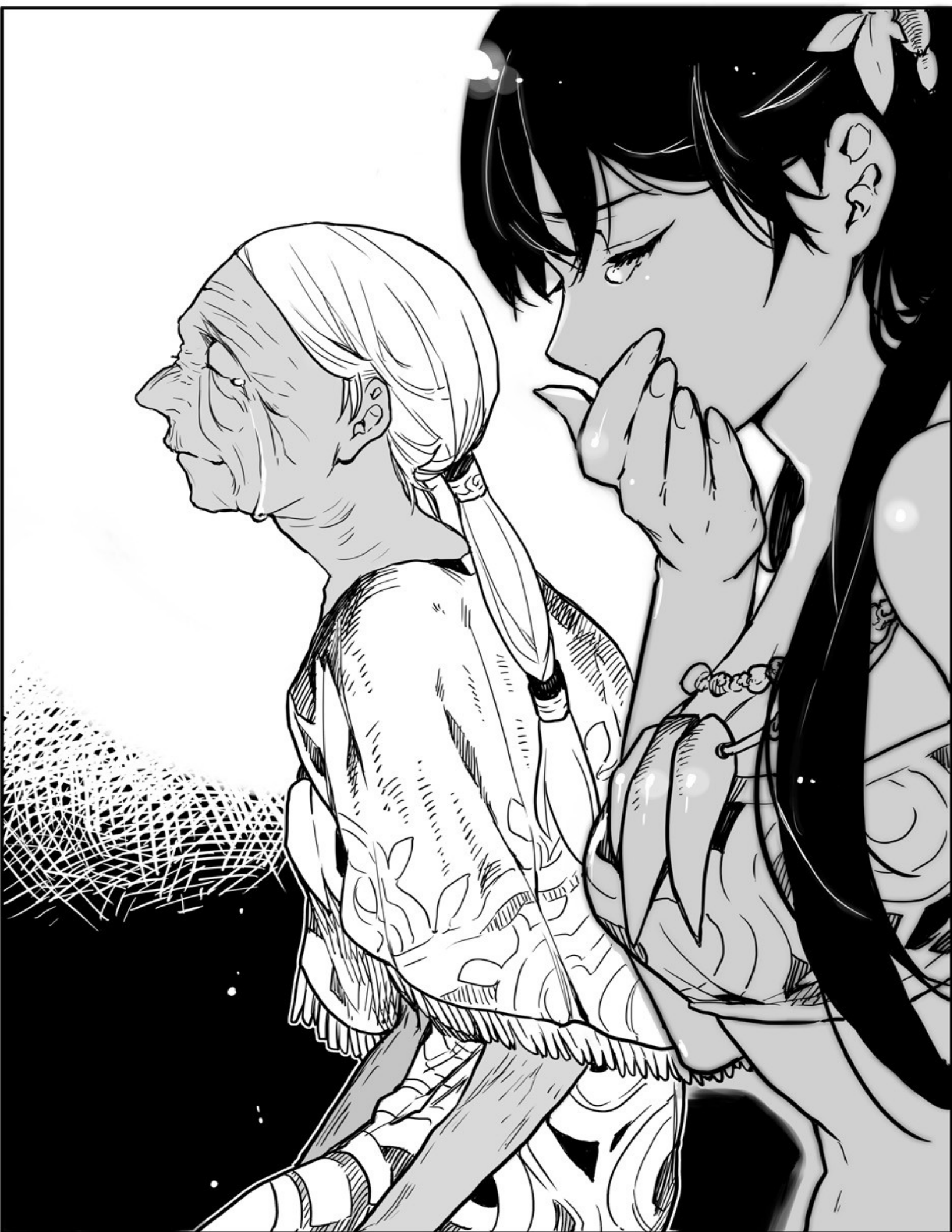
「Adding the fruit wine into the dish makes it disgustingly sweet. The aria is soggy as if it's rotten! Hey! You say this isn't just kiba thigh meat, you also used meat from the shoulder and back too, right?」

Donda Wu was furious, his face which was as hard as a boulder squeezed out a vicious wrinkle.

「Only Monta that feast on rotten meat will eat the torso of the kiba! You think we are beasts lurking in the forest!? We are humans! We are honorable and proud hunters of Forest's Edge! And you're making us eat Monta feed!? What are you thinking!?!」

「You are really a noisy child... Aren't behaving like you did before becoming clan head...?」

Grandma Jiba's eyes that were hidden behind her wrinkles looked slowly towards the clan head.



Donda Wu might be the clan head — But he was also the grandson of the grand elder.

The burly man glared at the old lady who was less than half his size.

「... If this is the food of Monta, than the Monta is more high class than humans... But maybe that is the truth of this forest...」

I wasn't sure if it was my imagination, but the old lady's voice seemed to have more strength in them.

「... Clan head Donda, it's fine for you to think this way. Everyone is free to decide what is right or wrong... but for your grandmother, this meat is fine...」

「Amazing... Grandma Jiba is talking spiritedly like before...」

Rimee Wu muttered.

Grandma Jiba's eyes which I couldn't discern the whereabouts of, turned toward Rimee this time.

「Rimee helped in this dish too huh... It tastes wonderful. Thank you, Rimee...」

「You're welcome!」

Rimee Wu shook her head hard and shoved the rest of her hamburg steak into her mouth in tears.

After looking at Rimee for a while, grandma Jiba asked: 「Ai Fa... where are you?」

The shoulders of Ai Fa who was beside me quivered.

「I'm sorry, but my eyes are getting bad. I can't see anything in this dim light... If you're here, can you come over so I can look at you...?」

「Hey.」

As Ai Fa didn't move, I elbowed her sides.

Ai Fa glared at me and stood up slowly... But for some reason, she grabbed my wrist tightly.

「Huh? Hey? Wait!!」 I yelled as I put my bowl of soup onto the ground.

She pulled me with a strength that refused me to break her restraint, and made me kneel beside grandma Jiba together with her.

Donda Wu glared at us with menacing eyes.

「Jiba Wu... I'm Ai Fa of house Fa. This man is a member of my family, Asuta.」

And of course, Grandma Jiba didn't even look at me. Her wrinkled fingers reached for Ai Fa's face.

Her rough fingers that seemed to be just skin and bones touched Ai Fa's smooth cheeks.

「Ah... It's been a while... How many years has it been... Ai Fa, I wanted to see you...」

Observing grandma Jiba from up close, I could see that she wasn't dried fruit, but a proper person.

Her face and fingers were filled with wrinkles, and her large nose and thin lips were carved with the chasm that marks her age. As her front teeth had all fallen off, I had a hard time understanding what she was saying.

But hidden under her drooping eyelids were blue eyes that had an unexpectedly sensibility in them. Her dried fruit-like face showed a face of kindness and affection.

She looked really gentle.

Her expression was really warm.

This was the first time in my life that I have seen an old lady smiling so blissfully.

「Leina Wu, have a taste of these delicious food too... Ai Fa, will you please feed me...?」

「... If you wish me too, I will gladly do so.」

Ai Fa took Jiba Wu's arm gently. Leina Wu wiped the tears from her eyes and stood up.

「What do you want to eat? The meat? Or poitan?」

「Kiba meat... This meat tastes really good...」

Ai Fa remained expressionless as she send the wooden spoon to the old lady's mouth with slightly clumsy movements.

「Ah, this is really good... Ai Fa, did you make this for me...?」

「No, I only watched from the sides. This is cooked by your family and Asuta over there.」

「...Asuta...」 She narrowed her eyes to a slit and looked my way.

If I could face that eldest son, Jiza Wu, from so close — Maybe I could catch a glimpse of his thoughts.

The old lady narrowed her eyes, and an obvious light of joy appeared in her eyes that could barely see.

「Asuta of house Fa... You made these dishes...?」

「Yes. Rimee Wu asked me to cook these... In a foreign country far away, my father works as a chef. I might just be an apprentice helping him, but I will be glad if these dishes suit your tastes.」

Grandma Jiba's hand groped about in the air.

Ai Fa looked at me calmly, and I timidly took grandma Jiba Wu's hand.

She held my fingers. Her fingers seemed drier than dry twigs, but there was warmth within her rough fingers.

「Thank you... I already feel that living is very painful... I couldn't walk properly nor eat tasty food... I'm now just some old bones that troubles my family... I feel sad every day, and wish that god will send my soul to the heavens right away....」

「We don't feel troubled at all...」

Rimee Wu shouted midway when her red haired sister beside her knocked Rimee's head, making her shut up.

「I came to this forest when I was five... I was one of the one thousand people who abandoned the southern god Jaguar and offered our souls to the western god Selva.」

「— Yes.」

「But I couldn't bring myself to like Forest's Edge... The southern forest had a wealth of resources. Although there were animals like large apes and poisonous snake that would attack humans, we could pick fruits any time we want... We would dig up insects burrowing in the ground, and grill colorful lizards before eating them... The people from the city mocked us as savages, but I was really happy back then...」

Grandma Jiba wasn't looking at me or Ai Fa.

She was looking into empty space, her clear eyes were filled with tears.

「But soldiers burned our tribe's forest... We fled to the west, and moved into the forest here. The people from the western city ordered us to hunt kiba, and prohibited us from touching the forest's resources... Even so, everyone was happy in the beginning. We didn't need to eat lizard meat any more. Or pick rotten fruits or fungi. We could eat all the kiba meat we wanted and taste the crops planted by others...」

「Yes...」

Maybe I didn't need to answer in the first place.

The scenes from the past was probably flashing across the old lady's eyes.

「But Forest's Edge was a terrifying place... In the first year, a hundred men was killed by the kiba. Another year passed, and another hundred men fell. As the men fell, the same number of women and children died from hunger with them. In the first years, we lost more than half of the one thousand people we had...」

「I see.」

「The Gazze House fell. Then the Lima House fell. The Tsun clan and Wu clan leads our people after that, and we established our current lives now... We hunt kiba, eat their meat, sell their horns and tusks to buy crops. And so, we learned how to survive in Forest's Edge... However, I always wanted to return to the forest where I was born.」

When I realized it, everyone had finished their meal and was listening to the grand elder's speech quietly.

「But our forest was burned and those who knew that forest had all passed on, only I was left... I feel lonely and sad, even though I have so many family with me, my heart still longs for that forest, not Forest's Edge... Kiba meat don't taste good at all, and neither were the crops. As I thought about all this, my teeth fell one by one, and I couldn't eat kiba meat any more. I realized I angered the god of the west... But I can finally be reunited with everyone... I harbored such thoughts in my heart... and keep wishing to return to the forest in the south...」

Her rough fingers that was full of cracks held my fingers with unexpected strength.

And suddenly, her clear blue eyes stared at me once again.

「I kept reminiscing my dead family and the forest that was gone. But now, I can finally think of my living family and this Forest's Edge. I can finally give my soul to the god of the west, Selva; not the god of the south Jaguar. I made up my mind to dine on kiba with my living family and live on... I have to live on... I can finally think of something that is so natural...」

「... You must be depressed because you couldn't eat tasty food when your teeth fell off earlier.」

Ai Fa looked tensed when she heard my casual reply.

This couldn't be helped, I was just an apprentice chef, I didn't know how to hold an elegant conversation with the grand elder of Forest's Edge that lived through hardships for 85 years.

「Before you became depressed, you must have cherished the people around you a lot. If not, Ai Fa and Rimee Wu wouldn't have worked so hard to help you and make you remember the joy of living. Because they harbored such thoughts, I also wanted to contribute what meagre abilities I have to help you.」

Grandma Jiba turned towards Ai Fa quietly.

Ai Fa bit her lips gently and stared back at grandma Jiba as if she was angry.

「If you want to offer thanks, please thank them. I'm already satisfied after you said that my dishes were delicious.」

「It's delicious... very delicious... I hated kiba meat the most, and think that poitan isn't food that people should eat. But I found the appetite to continue eating... To continue living in this forest...」

Grandma Jiba smiled quietly, then muttered:

「Ai Fa, take my necklace off for me.」

Ai Fa still looked angry as she took off the necklace as requested, and placed it in the old lady's small hands.

Grandma Jiba took out the kiba tusks and horns with her trembling twig-like hands.

「Jiba Wu of the Wu clan wish to gift blessings to Ai Fa from Fa house and her family Asuta... Please accept this...」

Out of the three tusks and horns on the necklace, she took out one each for Ai Fa and me.

「Hey, grand elder, this—」

With her back facing Donda Wu who was shouting, grandma Jiba smiled brilliantly.

「The tusks and horns of the Kiba holds the fate of the denizens of Forest's Edge... I am indebted to the two of you, and I hope that this tusk and horn will become a part of your flesh, your blood and your life... Jiba Wu of clan Wu bless your souls.」

This was the first time in this different world — that I received a tangible reward for my work.

Intermission - Wu Clan's Youngest Daughter

On the 25th day of the yellow month, Rimee Wu encountered that foreigner for the first time.

That morning, Rimee Wu completed her chores at the water source, then ran on the flat yellow path towards the Fa house. It was rare for her to not have any chores before the sun reached the middle of the sky, so she got permission from her mother to go out, and charged out of the Wu clan village.

As Ai Fa had to complete the chores at her place alone, she was much busier than Rimee Wu. Ever since Ai Fa's father Gill Fa passed away two years ago, it was hard for Rimee Wu to meet her.

When was the last time she met Ai Fa?

Maybe it had been about ten days.

Just the thought of seeing Ai Fa after such a long time brought a smile naturally to Rimee Wu's face.

However — the Fa House was empty.

Was she washing up for last night's dinner at the water source? Rimee Wu made a trip to the water source, but Ai Fa wasn't there.

Did the Tsun clan abducted her? — Rimee Wu felt a strong sense of uneasiness, and went to the house closest to Ai Fa's place to knock. She remember that this was the Fou house.

「Excuse me! I'm Rimee Wu from the Wu clan! Is anyone home?」

Someone pulled open the door slowly, and a skinny woman who didn't look well poked her head out.

「What's the matter? Why is someone from the Wu clan here at the Fou house...?」

「Sorry! I'm looking for Ai Fa, do you know where had she gone off to?」

Rimee Wu had met this woman a few times.

But now, her figure was frailer than what Rimee Wu remembered, and her eyes had turned so sad.

Rimee Wu remember that she was always carrying a baby the previous time they met.

The Wu clan also have a baby named Kota, but the baby in this lady's arms was smaller than Kota.

That baby was too little... anyone who see the baby would worry, wondering if the baby would be able to grow up properly.

「Ai Fa, huh... Ai Fa went into the forest early in the morning...」

The woman who was really skinny answered in a weak voice.

「Forest? She went in so early?」

「Yes... She brought that foreigner no one knew with her...」

「Foreigner...?」

Rimee Wu didn't know what that means.

She could see countless foreigners by going to the post station town, but they wouldn't take a single step into Forest's Edge. The people there were afraid of the kiba and Forest Edge's denizens who hunt kiba, as if they were monsters.

「What do you mean by foreigner? What is Ai Fa doing with someone like that?」

「I don't know either... Ai Fa and that foreigner were walking in the Forest's Edge settlement last evening too...」

「... Hmm?」

Rimee Wu was confused, but it was better to ask Ai Fa directly. So she bowed and thank that woman.

「Thank yo! I will wait for Ai Fa to come back at the Fa house!」

「Ah... Sorry... Is Ai Fa still refusing to marry into the Wu clan...?」

「Huh? Yes... what about it?」

「In that case... You are a part of the Wu clan, so it's better for you to not get involved with her, right...?」

A glimmer of life appeared within the woman's lifeless eyes.

「The eldest son of the Tsun clan was loitering around the Fa house... If the Tsun clan and Wu clan clashes, it will lead to the destruction of Forest's Edge...」

「This has nothing to do with me or Ai Fa!」

Rimee Wu yelled, and that woman showed a frightened expression and shirked away.

This woman was fearful of the two most powerful clans in Forest's Edge.

So she didn't want anything to do with Ai Fa who was on bad terms with both the Tsun and Wu clans.

And that was why Ai Fa was ostracized.

Rimee Wu felt a little sad. She nodded at the woman and said 「Good bye」.

But that woman spoke again:

「 Please wait... I couldn't help being a busybody, but not just Ai Fa, the Wu clan shouldn't get involved with that foreigner either... You should check with your clan head properly first... 」

The image of her father Donda Wu, the Wu clan head appeared in Rimee Wu's mind.

Donda Wu did mention quite often to 「 not get involved with foreigners 」 . Rimee Wu basically wouldn't leave Forest's Edge, so she had no chance to meet foreigners. Hence, she didn't know how serious the taboo was.

If Rimee Wu made the wrong judgement, her family might forbid her from interacting with Ai Fa.

She didn't want that to happen.

... I just want to get along with Ai Fa...

And now, even Ai Fa wants to break off relations with Rimee Wu.

Her reasons were the same as what that woman said earlier.

Ai Fa was on terrible terms with the Tsun clan, so the Wu clan shouldn't have any relations with her.

And Ai Fa even refused to marry into the Wu clan.

They weren't on hostile terms, but Rimee's father couldn't care less about Ai Fa after this incident.

Ai Fa marrying into the Wu clan — it felt really unreal to Rimee back then, so she didn't think it matters much when Ai Fa turned down the proposal. But now, no one wish to see Rimee Wu continuing to get along with Ai Fa, which troubles her a lot.

「 Ah... 」

The woman from the Fou house gasped softly.

Ai Fa and an unfamiliar foreigner was walking along the path before their eyes.

On their shoulder was a krilee stick, and a large kiba was hanging on it.

She hunted a kiba so early in the morning, Rimee Wu was in awe, and concentrated on observing that foreigner.

Foreigner — He was indeed one through and through.

He had black hair and eyes, and compared to western people, his skin was yellowish ivory.

He looked young, and should be around Ai Fa's age.

His clothes was strange. Both his clothes and shoes were white, with only the skin on his face and hand exposed. He also wrapped a white piece of cloth around his head.

How should I say this... He looks really weak.

Even though the two of them was carrying the kiba, that foreigner looked out of breath and had unsteady footsteps, as if he would fall with just a slight poke.

But — That foreigner seemed to be in high spirits.

His face lacked any distinct features and was as pale as the people in the city. But his black eyes were strong and shining.

Only his eyes were different from the people in the city.

That might be so, but he didn't look like someone from Forest's Edge either.

The foreigner was different from any person she had seen, and had a strange aura about him.

Never mind... He doesn't seem to be a bad guy...

But he was still a person from the city.

Forest's Edge denizen and the people of Rock city didn't get along.

Why was such a person acting together with Ai Fa? Rimee couldn't understand.

Ai Fa and the foreigner didn't notice Rimee and company, and disappeared from their sights.

「Did you see that? There had never been a foreigner in Forest's Edge before, this might be an ominous sign...」

「In that case, I have to help Ai Fa!」

Rimee Wu crossed her arms and lowered her head in deep thought. But no matter how she thought, she couldn't find an answer.

She was just eight and her capabilities were limited. She didn't even know what she could say or do to help. She needed to find out about taboos related to foreigners after all.

Although she made the trip here, she had to return home without even speaking with Ai Fa, which felt like a pity to Rimee Wu. But she couldn't find any other way even if she stayed.

The woman from house Fou showed a worried expression, and returned the way she came when Rimee Wu bade her farewell.

「Hmm? Rimee, where did you run off to?」

When Rimee Wu returned to the Wu clan village, her third brother Ludo was loitering lazily in the plaza.

Even though the men didn't have any work before noon, Ludo Wu always got up early.

Rimee Wu ran all the way back from Fa house, and she grabbed her brother's arm with ragged breath.

「I want to ask you! I think a foreigner is staying in the Fa house! What should I do?」

「... Ah? What are you saying?」

Rimee Wu didn't know how to explain either.

But she told everything she saw this morning and everything she heard to Ludo Wu.

「I don't really know either, but why is that woman Ai Fa getting involved with a foreigner... By the way, you haven't broken ties with that woman yet?」

「Of course! Ai Fa and I will be friends forever!」

「Right. Whatever. Anyway, if you want to solve the problem about that foreigner, you have to tell father about this. If Rock city is related to that man, it would violate a serious taboo.」

「... Ai Fa has to obey that weak man because of that?」

Rimee Wu looked up at Ludo Wu with a desperate face. Ludo then scratched his yellowish hair and said: 「What nonsense are you saying?」

「That woman is very self centered, and didn't even want to care about our father and the Tsun clan. It's impossible for her to listen to the people from the city. She probably grabbed someone from the city to work for her...? That didn't make sense either.」

「That's true. What is Ai Fa doing with a man from the city? I have been wondering about this since just now, but I couldn't find the reason.」

「Hmmp... but she can only rely on the people from the city now, right? She made enemies with both the Wu and Tsun clan, and the other people all fear her and kept their distance.」

「The Wu clan is not Ai Fa's enemy!」

Even though Rimee Wu was shouting angrily, her mean brother just shrugged and ignored her.

「Even if she isn't our enemy, she still refused to marry into our clan. We can't have any relations with her now. No matter how much you scream, we won't go rescue an outsider.」

「I don't want to talk to you anymore! Ludo is a brat! Dummy!」

Rimee Wu stamp her foot angrily and ran into the house.

「You are the brat!」 Rimee Wu heard her brother yelling behind her and pulled open the door.

She didn't see her father.

He was probably still sleeping. In the room was her eldest brother Jiza Wu and his wife Sati Lei Wu. They were chatting softly with their son Kota Wu sleeping between them.

「Ara, what's the matter Rimee?」

Sati Lei Wu shocked the cradle made from woven grass and smiled at Rimee.

Rimee Wu was so anxious that she didn't even take off her shoes. She sat down before the three of them.

「I want to ask you! I think a foreigner have moved into the Fa house! What should I do?」

Her eldest brother Jiza Wu was scarier than her father Donda Wu.

However, her brother was more adamant on following the rules of Forest's Edge than anyone else. At a time like this, her brother should be able to tell Rimee what she and Ai Fa should do.

But — when her brother heard Rimee's explanation, his words was hard for Rimee to accept.

「Rimee, don't come into contact with the people from the village as much as possible. Before that foreigner leaves, don't go near the Fa house.」

「But why? If that foreigner is a bad guy, won't Ai Fa be in danger!?」

「Be it the people from the city or the denizens of the forest, they won't fall into danger if they obey their respective laws. Since the head of the Fa house claims to be a hunter, she won't lose to the people from the city.」

「But...」

「The head of the Fa house must have thought it through before bringing a man from the city into the settlement. If there isn't any problems, then no one can blame her actions. But if you get involved and upset their relationship, then the head of the Fa house would need to take responsibility for any problems that arises.」

Jiza's face remained calm as he explained.

「So Rimee, you shouldn't get involved.」

Rimee Wu couldn't agree at all.

But Donda Wu who appeared later only said: 「Don't get involved with foreigners.」

Donda Wu looked displeased, she was lucky that he didn't ask Rimee to break off relations with the Fa house. Rimee Wu didn't argue with her father.

Why isn't anyone worried about Ai Fa?

That was what saddens Rimee Wu the most.

Two years ago, the Wu clan once asked Ai Fa to marry into their clan.

Before that, only Rimee Wu and the grand elder Jiba Wu had interacted with Ai Fa before. But when Donda Wu heard that Ai Fa harshly punished the eldest son of the Tsun clan, he jokingly said he want Ai Fa to be wed to his second son Darum Wu.

It was sudden, but no one objected to this. Only Jiza Wu appeared unhappy about this.

Ai Fa lost all her family at the age of 15, and also had a falling out with the Tsun clan that rules Forest's Edge. Everyone sympathizes with Ai Fa's circumstances and would be happy to see this forthright and strong woman marry into the clan — Most of them was supportive of this.

For Rimee Wu, Ai Fa was her childhood playmate, and she becoming family made her feel bashful and uneasy. At this time, Jiba Wu couldn't walk too well and couldn't visit Ai Fa. As everyone thinks this wasn't a bad idea, she agreed to this proposal.

However — Ai Fa turned down the marriage. She said she will become the head of the Fa house, and make a living through hunting.

When Rimee Wu heard her say that, she felt relieved.

When Ai Fa's father Gill Fa was still alive, he often brought Ai Fa into the forest as a hunter to assist him. Ai Fa looked very happy back then, and Rimee Wu couldn't imagine her abandoning her work as a hunter and becoming a housewife.

Rimee Wu was just six, and couldn't organize her thoughts too well. But when she heard that Ai Fa turned down the marriage, her feeling of relief outweigh that of regret.

They might not be relatives, but Rimee Wu still treasure Ai Fa deeply.

She hope they could maintain the relationship they had.

But Ai Fa changed.

She said that she was on terrible terms with the Tsun clan and shouldn't have any relations with the Wu clan, and kept her distance from Rimee Wu.

And her family also lost interest in Ai Fa.

When they heard that Ai Fa turned down the marriage proposal, some people felt angry or disappointed. Everyone slowly stopped talking about her.

Even though she didn't become a member of the Wu clan, her circumstances remained the same — she didn't have anyone to rely on and was an enemy of the chief clan. Ai Fa survived alone, but no one sympathized with her or felt sad for her.

Only herself and Jiba Wu had the right to call themselves Ai Fa's friend.

But Jiba Wu couldn't walk anymore.

So only she could stay by Ai Fa's side now.

With this in mind, Rimee Wu kept visiting the Fa house no matter how cold Ai Fa treated her.

This carried on for two years — and then, that foreigner appeared.

Just who was that foreigner?

Even though her father and elder brother told her not to go near the foreigner, she couldn't just stand idly by and watch. So she had been running to the Fa House every day since she first saw that foreigner.

If they didn't notice her when Rimee Wu goes near their house, it won't be a problem.

And Donda Wu and her brother only warned Rimee Wu not to go near the foreigner, so she wanted to wait until Ai Fa and that foreigner was apart before grabbing Ai Fa and questioning her.

But that chance never came.

Be it morning or night, they always stick together like glue.

When the sun reaches the middle of the sky, Ai Fa would head into the forest alone to hunt. It was a good chance, but Rimee Wu have chores at home during this time.

Time flies, and before Rimee Wu could take any action, five days passed in a flash.

It's getting late too...

It was getting dark outside, Rimee Wu was running fast.

She had to help her family tan hides, so she was held back much later tonight.

She wouldn't be able to make it for dinner now, and her father would definitely yell at her. But even so, Rimee Wu wouldn't be able to sleep soundly if she didn't check on Ai Fa.

What does Ai Fa plan to do with that foreigner?

After observing the two of them, she realized the atmosphere between them wasn't sinister.

They might fight at times, but neither side seemed to be angry for real.

Even so, she still didn't know why Ai Fa let that foreigner stay at her place.

Was that foreigner trying to take Ai Fa as his wife?

Was that why he barged into Ai Fa's place?

But if Ai Fa wasn't willing, she wouldn't let him into her home. But if she was willing, she would probably take other actions. At the very least, Ai Fa didn't trim her long hair that symbolizes a unwed woman, or wore a long dress that covered her entire body.

... I don't want Ai Fa to leave Forest's Edge...

That's what worries Rimee Wu the most.

Ai Fa had broken ties with the all the denizens of Forest's Edge. Only Rimee Wu and Jiba Wu think of Ai Fa as a friend. But now, she wanted to break off relations with the two of them too.

Could she really live on alone?

Rimee Wu couldn't imagine that.

So if Ai Fa grew tired of Forest's Edge and wanted to head towards a faraway land, it wouldn't be a surprise.

All that matters is that Ai Fa is happy...

But she didn't want to say goodbye to Ai Fa forever.

She didn't want this to be goodbye while they grew further and further apart.

That was probably why Rimee Wu visited the Fa house every day.

Like what Ludo Wu and Jiza Wu said, she didn't think Ai Fa would be defeated by a weakling from the city. But Ai Fa might abandon Forest's Edge and elope with the foreigner — As Rimee Wu couldn't wipe away this feeling of unease, she had to confirm Ai Fa's presence everyday.

When the sun shifted to the west of the forest, Rimee Wu arrived at Ai Fa's place.

She sighed in relief when she saw the candle light through the window.

Great... She's still here.

She just needs to make sure she was safe, then she could go home for the day. Rimee Wu thought as she approached the window with quiet movements.

Ah...!

When she reached the window, Rimee Wu almost gasp in shock.

Ai Fa was having dinner with that foreigner.

That foreigner — was wearing Forest's Edge clothing.

He had a white cloth wrapped around his head and wore white clothes. But clothes from Forest's Edge was definitely draped on his body! Those were clothes Gill Fa wore when he was alive.

Does this mean Ai Fa had accepted this foreigner into the Fa house? Is this foreigner going to become Ai Fa's husband?

Unease and doubt suddenly filled Rimee Wu's heart.

This meant that this foreigner was compatible with Ai Fa? She felt confused and uneasy about this.

Rimee Wu tried her best to make herself taller, and peeked at the two of them through the window.

She was good at keeping her presence hidden, even the sharp Ai Fa had never detected her before.

The two of them seemed to be quarreling.

「Eehhh, but why? Are you still bearing a grudge over what happened this afternoon?」

The foreigner couldn't keep his voice down.

Aside from his pale skin, there wasn't any distinct features on his face.

His body was as slender as a woman, which was similar to the people in the city. So that wasn't really distinct either.

But his black eyes were still sparkling and appeared rather forceful.

What strange eyes.

Even though his eyes were sparkling, there was a hint of unease in them.

His eyes were as gentle as a woman and as strong as a man, so it was hard to categorize him.

However — Rimee Wu didn't hate his eyes.

「What happened this afternoon...? Ah, you mean that mean thing you did to me because you got too caught up? I already forgot about that.」

Ai Fa answered in a quiet voice.

What was that mean thing? Rimee Wu tilted her head confusedly, and the expression of the foreigner changed drastically. His face was panicky just now, but it turned into surprise.

「You forgot... Then why won't you tell me what you think?」

「Shut up! I don't want to talk about it, that's why!」

Ai Fa suddenly yell loudly, surprising Rimee Wu.

The foreigner seemed shocked too.

That foreigner has an expressive face, so it was easy to tell what he was thinking.

But Ai Fa's face was even more obvious.

Her face was blushing for some reason, and she was lowering her head a little and covering her face with the wooden plate in her hands.

The foreigner was sitting opposite Ai Fa, and probably couldn't see her expression. But Rimee Wu was observing them from the side, so she could see very clearly.

Ai Fa — was showing a bashful face.

「Enough! Stop looking at me!」

Ai Fa usually wouldn't show her expression to others.

Be it happiness or sadness, it was possible to see some hints from Ai Fa's brows and eyes, but she wouldn't show how she really feel. Since Gill Fa passed away, she tend to do this even more.

That was why Rimee Wu was very shocked when she saw Ai Fa showing so much emotion.

On the other hand, the foreigner fell into deep thought with a sigh of pity.

So — he didn't notice.

He didn't notice Ai Fa lowering her plate and staring at him.

There seemed to be a faint smile on Ai Fa's face.

Her cheeks were still a little red, and she stared at the foreigner with a look of satisfaction and happiness.

Ai Fa was just like how she was when Gill Fa was still alive — Rimee Wu really likes the warm and gentle light in her blue eyes.

Ai Fa...

In this two years, Ai Fa had never shown such an expression.

Ai Fa's face was always cold and stiff, as if a part of her had died along with her father.

Is this the person who made her show such a face?

It didn't matter where he was from. Foreigner or not, if he could make Ai Fa feel comfortable and at ease, that would be enough.

Rimee Wu thought as she gaze at that foreigner — he was also smiling with his head slightly lowered too.

He had a disappointed face earlier, but his black eyes were filled with satisfaction and happiness just like Ai Fa now, as he stared at the weirdly shaped meat in his wooden plate.

He probably shared the same feelings as Ai Fa.

So this was family.

Even though Ai Fa lost Gill Fa, refused to marry into the Wu clan, she still needed family.

Living alone like this was too depressing.

Rimee Wu wiped away the tears in her eyes with the back of her hand, and tried saying in the most cheerful voice she could:

「Hey, what are you eating?」